

01/05/2004 Entry: "The Latest Threat to Ranchers"

Colorado Voices

The Latest Threat to Ranchers

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There's rage in Jay Miller's voice. It is fueled by a fear that is so deep and guttural its tentacles reach primitive, raw emotions.

What if we can't survive this?

This Virginia cattleman never asks such a question. It isn't in his character. He's not a quitter. But it's there on the tips of our tongues. I won't ask it either. It reveals too much of a future I don't want to think about.

We talk every day: phone, e-mail and answering machine. We dissect this mad cow mess, talk about it too much, hunting vigorously for solutions while everything we've worked for could tumble into a financial abyss because of one dairy cow with mad cow disease (also called BSE, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy).

Just when we were beginning feel the sting of poor cattle prices fade, this happens. The word "unfair" doesn't begin to describe the reality. Jay and many cattle producers like him have worked hundreds of hours to keep this food safety debacle from happening. And all the hard work now seems threatened.

Danni Beer, a South Dakotan, has dedicated three years of her life to secure mandatory Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) for food. Putting together coalitions with consumer groups, churches, citizen action groups and other ranchers like Jay, she muscled COOL into the 2002 Farm Bill.

But as the BSE case emerged in Alberta, Canada, last spring, the packing and retail industry, with cutthroat help from the Bush administration, began a full frontal assault, doing everything it could to destroy labeling for consumers. It claimed labels like "Product of Canada" or "Product of Mexico" would cost billions.

Now, another BSE cow has emerged, and ironically, had COOL been law, this cow's birth origin would have been immediately known. The Japanese, who requested labeling, might not have backed out of our beef market last week if we'd had it.

The price of not having COOL will be much larger than the label cost on a package of beef.

COOL by itself is not a solution to BSE. It doesn't prevent the disease, but it does allow consumers to choose whether or not they want to buy food from another country. That is an important choice when other mechanisms to keep potentially tainted food out of our system fail. Many necessary consumer safeguards were dismantled under free trade agreements. The last and most important firewall of protection we have is the knowledgeable consumer.

This is underscored by the administration's push to reopen the Canadian border in the midst of this latest BSE discovery. Their proposed rule change would allow a return to the importation of more than 1.2 million cattle a year. Most will go directly to our packing houses. Colorado receives many Canadian cattle, and has often processed more than 10,000 head in a single month. The USDA has already reopened our markets to Canadian processed beef.

My friend Jay Miller argues that the USDA is in denial, that it has abandoned what are normal procedures for containment and control of an emerging disease. Within less than a year, two cows born and raised in Alberta have tested positive for BSE. It is not a significant sample from a statistical standpoint, but common sense suggests it is more than coincidence that both come from Alberta. Imports should stop until we are risk-free. He suggests that the USDA track and quarantine all Canadian cattle currently inside our border and adopt standards requiring that every Canadian cow here be tested for BSE.

In recent years, as we have journeyed into hell, we have played dangerous games with our food inspection system. That there was not a greater reprisal against ConAgra for E. coli-contaminated meat in Colorado last year speaks volumes about the power of the giant packing industry in this nation.

We must have zero tolerance for health threats of this consequence. It is the only way we are going to maintain consumer trust.

What have we become as a people, Jay asks, when human life and endeavor are considered just another expense of doing business?

Kathleen Sullivan Kelley ranches southwest of Meeker. Applications for Colorado Voices are accepted in February.