

# Food safety without borders

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By Ben Chapman & Justin Kastner, PhD

Borders matter, even if only because people say they matter, when it comes to North American food-safety policy.

That's one of the assertions we made in Ottawa last weekend at the Organization for the History of Canada's Canadian-American Relations Conference.

The Canada-U.S. border, like all borders, contains and causes certain political, social and economic realities. But food-safety and animal-disease problems do not bow to borders. Consequently, farmers, regulators and consumers on both sides must be vigilant. That means being honest about food-safety risks, implementing strategies to manage those risks, and keeping the public informed.

When it comes to the issue of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or mad-cow disease), U.S. interests should press for continued food-safety vigilance and quit the blame-Canada discourse. For their part, Canadians must accept that food problems lurk north, as well as south, of the border.

The mad-cow drama of 2003 illustrates the value of a pro-active approach on both sides of the 49th parallel. Since May 20 (Canada) and Dec. 23 (United States), the two countries have adopted similar risk-management approaches. Most important, their federal regulators have avoided empty, "our food is safe" messages.

Both countries are stepping up surveillance of high-risk animals, encouraging open dialogues about the risks of BSE, and working out regulatory firewalls, feed rules and enhanced inspection practices designed to hedge against a British-style prion disaster.

Canada's and the United States' separate but parallel food-safety approach is not surprising. Agricultural trade and scientific co-operation have been hallmarks of Canada-U.S. relations.

As each other's most important trading partner, we have adopted similar approaches to ensure the safety of the food supply.

Today, Canada's and the United States' economic partnership and scientific like-mindedness are conspicuous in international forums, where the two countries both advocate an evidence-based approach to food-safety risk management. The two countries have adopted a common risk-analysis approach to food-safety policy issues ranging from agricultural biotechnology to beef hormones.

In Ottawa, after talking with Canadian-American historians drawing on policy comparison, historical scholarship and media analysis, we concluded that borders do matter, whether or not livestock producers and trade officials are border-conscious at the moment.

But we also believe that the way forward on BSE must be taken without reference to the border. BSE is a poorly understood phenomenon, the existence of which demands surveillance and regulatory sweat within each country.

Like other food-safety problems, BSE does not single out specific countries. Of course, trade restrictions occur at borders, but country-specific food-safety problems arise not because borders exist but because countries fail to adequately monitor food safety. And that is what counts.

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*Their commentary also appeared in the Globe & Mail newspaper on May 25, 2004, on page A23:*

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