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INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Food Safety

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, March 11, 2015

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[Translation]

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FOOD SAFETY

Hon. Claudette Tardif: Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

A few weeks ago, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency confirmed a case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) on a farm in Alberta.

My honourable colleague and fellow Albertan Senator Black asked you a question on this matter on February 19. At that time, only South Korea had closed its borders to Canadian beef. Since then, five other countries have also closed their borders to Canadian beef: Peru and Taiwan have banned Canadian beef imports, while Belarus, China and Indonesia have imposed additional restrictions.

Leader, what steps is the government taking to reassure the international community regarding the safety of Canadian beef?

Hon. Claude Carignan (Leader of the Government): Thank you for your question, senator. As you know, our government continues to proactively engage with our trading partners to ensure that our markets stay open and to reopen markets to Canadian beef as quickly as possible.

With regard to the countries that have imposed temporary restrictions, these markets, while important, represent a small percentage, only around four per cent, of Canada's overall beef exports.

The World Organisation for Animal Health recognizes Canada as a controlled risk status country. We expect our trading partners to continue to recognize this status.

Senator Tardif: Leader, losing the Chinese market is particularly problematic, especially considering Minister Ritz's comments from November of last year. During a meeting of the Agriculture Committee in the other place, Minister Ritz said he was happy to announce that the negotiations and marketing missions in Asia had paid off, and that China had become a major importer of Canadian beef. In addition, Mr. Solverson of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association said, and I quote:

[English]

Having participated in similar promotional events in China, I can tell you that Canadian beef is viewed very favourably and it's important to seize the opportunity to build on that momentum

Canadian beef exports to China have increased significantly in the last few years. In fact, in September 2014, it was not minimal. Exports to China had already reached 5,850 tonnes. Now that China has closed its border to Canadian beef, it seems that our great reputation in China has quickly vanished and our tremendous progress has come to a halt. It is not known when these temporary restrictions will be lifted.

What steps is the government taking to restore beef exports to China in particular?

[Translation]

Senator Carignan: Senator, as I said, the countries that imposed temporary restrictions, although important, represent a small percentage, namely 4 per cent, of Canada's total beef exports at this time.

As you know, in 2014, our budget included a \$205 million commitment for ongoing programs to fight BSE; measures that you voted against.

Senator Tardif: Leader, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency announced that the case of BSE discovered in February came from the same farm where a case of BSE was detected in 2010. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has been seriously affected by the government's budget cuts in the past few years.

What is the government going to do to help the Canadian Food Inspection Agency operate effectively in order to prevent a third case of BSE on the same farm?

Senator Carignan: Senator, as you know, according to the internationally recognized protocols, the agency continues to work with its provincial industry partners and it will keep Canadians abreast of the situation when other information based on scientific data becomes available.

As I said, the agency confirmed that no part of the animal's carcass entered the human or animal food chain. Moving forward we will have to trust the work of the agency and await the results and the scientific data that will be available.

Senator Tardif: The loss of funding for public research into agriculture is particularly problematic, Leader. In fact, in this type of situation we should be increasing support for this inspection agency.

On another related matter, you know that a group of American ranchers in the United States is using the BSE case in Alberta to defend COOL, the Country of Origin Labelling practice, which requires producers to indicate on the product packaging where the animal was born, raised and slaughtered. Even though the World Trade Organization ruled against the use of this discriminatory practice, the United States government refused to comply.

Leader, Canadian producers have had to deal with this discriminatory practice since 2008. What steps will the government take to address COOL, especially in light of the recent BSE case?

Senator Carignan: Senator, as I said, the World Organisation for Animal Health recognizes Canada as a controlled risk status country. Therefore, our expectation is that our trade partners will continue to recognize this status and that such situations will not be used to establish a practice or as a pretext to violate international agreements. Therefore, we expect our trade partners to continue to recognize this status.

I would remind senators that more than \$205 million was earmarked in the 2014 budget to support ongoing programs to combat BSE, and yet you voted against the budget.