



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

January 14, 2008

USCA: Beef trade with Argentina is a bad idea

Plumes of dark smoke hung over the countryside in Great Britain for months in 2001, while bulldozers piled cattle carcasses high.

For much of the year, British officials oversaw the burning of livestock carcasses in a last-ditch effort to stop the rapid spread of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD). When the smoke finally lifted, some six million animals had been destroyed and the livestock industry had lost nearly \$20 billion.

This grim scene should serve as a cautionary tale to anyone who thinks FMD is not a threat to America, starting with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which is currently deciding whether or not to lower animal health standards that guard against this crippling disease.

With rural America's attention focused squarely on the farm bill, the USDA quietly proposed a new beef importing plan last January. The little-known and little-publicized plan would allow for the importation of beef from select regions of Argentina, in spite of that country's long, documented history with FMD.

Under USDA's scheme, "safe" regions of Argentina would be designated and products from those areas could flow freely into the United States. Such a plan may sound harmless to a government bureaucrat, but those of us with our livelihoods on the line have started asking some very pointed questions about the plan's implementation.

For example, how can we keep a highly infectious airborne disease like FMD from crossing over make-believe boundaries around these "safe zones?" And, how can we trust Argentina not to use these "safe" regions as gateways for shipping products from infected areas or even from Brazil--another country with past FMD epidemics?

Whether the country is defaulting on billions in loans made by U.S. companies, accepting suitcases full of money from an anti-American leader in South America, or siding against U.S. farmers in World Trade Organization courts, one has to wonder if Argentina is a friend to the United States.

A new President recently took the reins in Argentina, and she has a real opportunity to turn things around and prove they are trustworthy. But, until some real reforms are made, our government should not even entertain the thought of jeopardizing the safety of the country's livestock.

Researchers at Kansas State University recently predicted that an FMD outbreak would cost Kansas \$945 million. Just imagine the final toll if the disease were to spread across the Plains.

Luckily, the USDA's proposal is just that--a proposal. It has not been approved and has languished for a year. However, as long as this proposal is still on the table, it is still a threat and cattlemen should be very concerned.

The U.S. Cattlemen's Association (USCA)--a group of which I'm a member and director--has been leading the charge in defending our country from regionalized beef trade with Argentina. We are mobilizing real opposition to this plan and are calling on Congress to nip USDA's proposal in the bud once and for all.

Just this month, the organization passed a resolution that calls on our elected officials to use "whatever steps necessary" to fix the USDA's mess.

Let's hope Congress heeds the call. There is too much at stake to let this issue go unresolved any longer.

With debate over the farm bill coming to a close, lawmakers should turn their attention to solidifying America's defenses against FMD before our blue skies turn black with smoke and our rural economies are left in shambles.

--Doug Zalesky, Hesperus, Colo., USCA regional director, co-chairman of International Trade Committee.