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No Way to Treat a Neighbor

It'd be a shame if last week's mad cow scare upset the Bush Administration's plans to reopen the border to Canadian cattle. The ban has been in place far too long already, and for reasons that have much more to do with trade protectionism than safe hamburgers.

The U.S. -- and eventually 33 other countries -- cut off Canadian cattle imports in May 2003 after a single case of mad cow disease, formally known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), was discovered in Alberta. The embargo has devastated the cattle industry in Canada and led to higher prices for U.S. consumers. According to the Department of Agriculture, carnivores are paying at least five cents more for a pound of beef these days. The U.S. meatpacking industry has also been hurt, with Tyson Foods just announcing that it will close several plants temporarily and lay off workers due to a cattle shortage caused by the embargo.

Of course, some U.S. cattle groups want the embargo kept in place indefinitely. They cite safety as the reason, but in truth domestic ranchers -- like their counterparts in the steel and sugar industries -- prefer the higher prices for cattle that result from protectionist trade polices. Lifting the Canadian import ban could reduce profit margins.

Besides, science and health experts have exposed the safety concerns as way overblown. At the peak of Britain's mad cow epidemic in the early 1990s, millions of Britons were consuming thousands of pounds of contaminated meat. This massive exposure produced a total of 143 cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob, the fatal disease that can result from humans eating BSE-tainted beef. By contrast, there have been a grand total of four mad cows identified in North America -- three in Canada and one (Canadian-born) cow in the U.S. There's no evidence that any BSE-infected beef has entered the food chain.

The disease spreads through cattle-feed, and the infected six-year-old Alberta beef cow discovered last week was born shortly after new cattle-feed regulations were put in place. Canadian officials say that leftover contaminated feed likely caused the infection, but it's also worth noting that the infectious agents that cause BSE are concentrated in the animal's brain and central nervous system, both of which are removed before processing.

Some lawmakers from beef-producing states are calling for an extension of the embargo on the grounds that lifting it will affect U.S. negotiations with Japan and Korea to reopen their border to American beef. But that argument, put forward by Republican Senator John Thune of South Dakota and others, is a red herring. Industry sources familiar with the ongoing U.S.-Asia negotiations tell us that the discussion centers on the age requirements for testing cows, not whether the U.S. reopens its border to Canadian cattle.

These Republicans might also want to recall the reason Asia banned U.S. beef imports in the first place after a lone Holstein in Washington state was diagnosed with mad cow in December 2003. Japan and Korea were following the bad example we set in dealing with our neighbors to the north.

The good news is that the White House, now that the election is over, is rejecting the protectionist arguments. There's no reason the border re-opening shouldn't continue on schedule in March. Both U.S. industry and consumers are best served by sound science and free trade.