

# Ontario Ag Minister Visits Pa. For Trade Talk

(Continued from Page A1)

Officials are hard at work ensuring trade partners that both their meat and live cattle are safe for export.

They are asking for trade to return to normal as soon as possible.

The U.S. closed the border to Canadian beef and other ruminant meat when bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, was discovered May 20 in an aged beef cow in the western Canadian province of Alberta.

Helen Johns, Ontario Minister of Agriculture and Food, paid a visit to Pennsylvania this week to ask ag leaders for support in moving ahead quickly to reopen the U.S. border to Canadian beef and live cattle.

The Tuesday visit from Johns and several other members of her department came four days after USDA Secretary Ann Veneman announced that "after thorough scientific analysis" the U.S. will begin accepting permits for importing certain boxed ruminant meats and wild game meat from Canada. Imports are expected to begin in early September.

Mexico also announced early this week that it will be partially lifting its ban on Canadian beef, in terms similar to the U.S. decision.

Johns met with Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Dennis Wolff and representatives from state ag organizations, including PennAg Industries, the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Pennsylvania Beef Council, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, Pennsylvania Farmers Union, and the State Grange. Others representing the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture included John Enck, state veterinarian, and Russ Redding, deputy secretary.

Johns said she came here for help because Pennsylvania is a

key importer of cattle from Ontario, including dairy animals.

"We wanted to educate people," Johns said of her trip to Harrisburg. "We wanted people to understand that it was one cow in Alberta (with BSE). We wanted people to understand our food safety system."

While the USDA is opening the border to boxed meat imports, Johns said it also needs to be reopened for live cattle in order for Ontario to recover from an economic slump caused by the export ban and to stabilize the North American beef market.

Complicating the issue is Japan's refusal to import any U.S.-processed beef that may have originated in Canada. Japan is the top importer of U.S. beef. According to a recent post on the USDA Website, the USDA believes Japan's decision to ban Canadian beef is unnecessary, but will continue working with Japan to keep markets open.

In the past 13 weeks, Ontario has lost \$245 million in revenue because of the border closing, according to Johns. The province produces about 20 percent of the beef raised in Canada, she said.

At risk is Ontario's \$1 billion annual cattle and meat export trade, with 60 percent of that market represented by live cattle, according to Derek Nelson, communication specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food.

In 2002, Ontario exported \$803.5 million worth of food products to Pennsylvania alone. Of that

amount, \$206 million was from live cattle and other ruminants, beef and other ruminant meats, feed, and pet food, according to a fact sheet provided by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food. About half of the \$206 million came from live cattle that went to Pennsylvania packing operations.

"It does affect meat processing centers in Pennsylvania," said Ag Secretary Wolff, noting that the state's total meat processing industry leads the nation.

Wolff also said the situation has decreased dairy cow numbers and milk production in the state, because Canada has been a significant source of dairy replacement stock.

While the impact on milk production might be boosting U.S. milk markets somewhat — and the border closing has pumped up beef prices — Wolff called it a "knee jerk reaction" to focus on these gains over the long-term benefits of a stable trade relationship with Canada.

But Wolff acknowledged the limited scope of Pennsylvania's role in easing the trade block.

"You have to understand that Washington has not asked our opinion in this matter," he told Johns.

(Turn to Page A46)



Helen Johns, Ontario Minister of Agriculture and Food, with Pennsylvania Ag Secretary Dennis Wolff at the PDA building Tuesday. Photo by Dave Lefever

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