

The BSE Crisis Affected Families, Communities and Canadian Food Security



At least one participant from 100 of the 177 farms/ranches in the study responded to the open-ended questions in our survey: What was the impact of the discovery of BSE in Canadian cattle on your farming or ranching operation? Your family? Your community? What do you think the long-term impact will be on your rural community?

The answers reveal that farmers and ranchers endure stress and fatigue and take extra work to keep their farms and to feed their families. This actually amounts to subsidizing food prices for Canadians, but very few talked about it this way.

Stress and fatigue were often discussed in the open-ended questions. This impact is also evident in the survey (see Information Sheet 6). Husbands and wives took up off-farm employment, or increased the amount of hours in jobs they were already doing off farm, while continuing to run the farm operation. Older farmers put off retirement, and children gave up plans for taking over the farm. Children worried about being able to afford advanced education. Families took fewer holidays and cut back on recreation, both because of lack of time and lack of funds.



A frequently expressed regret was that they would not see their children take up farming as an occupation. The loss or potential loss of family farms was a difficult weight to bear: “We built a house and worked hard finishing it ourselves on the inside...[our son and family] moved in on the main floor and dad and I to the basement flat.” After BSE the bills for the new barn forced them to sell the house.

Stress was experienced in the loss of community and business services (e.g., ice rinks, equipment repair), the loss of small businesses in local towns, and the loss of farms by neighbours. Time to volunteer in community organizations was gone. In some areas, “bad feelings” developed because some had the ability to buy up land or cattle when others were failing.

A common theme was the loss of respect for the farmer and his or her work: “I wanted to be part of this [survey] because I think it is important that the general public understands the cow/calf producer was not responsible for this mess....We feel like ‘pariahs’ in society. We aren’t the bad guys here!”



At the level of society, the impact of the BSE crisis in the long term was foreseen as the loss of small and medium sized farms and the corporatization of agriculture. This observation is supported by annual Canadian statistics on the number of farms. Many people commented on the loss of agricultural land to recreational use. The implications were identified by several farmers as a potential loss of food security and safety for Canadians: “There will be less farms, with a turn toward food being produced/sourced from countries that have lower standards environmentally, thus lower quality foods and lower wages, so the food remains cheap.”