

Atlantic Centre  
of Excellence for  
Women's Health

www.acewh.dal.ca  
acewh@dal.ca

## RESEARCH PROJECT:

### **A COHORT STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF PRION DISEASE ON FARM FAMILY COMMUNITY HEALTH**

This research was made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.



## **The Impact of 'mad cow disease' on Farm Family and Community Health**

By Tanya Barber (tanyabarberresearch@gmail.com)

### **What is the research project?**

The Farm Family Health project was developed to study the effects of the 2003 outbreak of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), known as 'mad cow disease', on farm families and communities. Studies were conducted in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia to advance knowledge about how different regions were affected by the closure of international borders, the policy and practice response of provincial and federal governments, and the impact of the BSE crisis on farm family and community health (see Cook, 2011; Mitra, et al. 2009; and Amaratunga, et al. 2007 for research results). Our report presents an analysis of the Nova Scotia findings. The qualitative study in Nova Scotia revealed the distinctiveness of Nova Scotia agriculture, the realities facing Nova Scotia's farm families and farming communities post BSE and the need for regionally and provincially appropriate policies and practices.

### **Who participated?**

Adults over the age of 18 who lived on a farm and had knowledge or experience of the BSE crisis were eligible to participate. Our sample consisted of a cross-section of participants, including: women and men; various farming occupations; large and small-scale farms; owners and operators; dairy and beef farms; those directly affected by BSE and those who did not have BSE in their stock; and family members. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 participants as well as two focus groups within Nova Scotia. In total 27 individuals participated in this study.

### **What did we find?**

Five key themes were identified as demonstrating the concerns, needs, and experiences of Nova Scotia farmers in face of the BSE crisis and the changing world of agriculture. These include:

1) *The impact of the BSE crisis on farm families*  
Farmers, their families and communities recognized BSE as a crisis. Many described loss of

income and increased debt and heightened strain in their family relationships. Some were unsure if they could continue farming, but many were strongly committed to farming and they used a variety of strategies to cope with the effects of BSE— such as off-farm work, diversification, and investing in organic farming.

2) *The health effects of the BSE crisis for farm families*  
The strain and stress caused by the BSE crisis resulted in poor physical and mental health outcomes for participants. In addition, lack of work/life balance in farming was reported; participants described long work days and rarely enjoying time off. They desired more leisure time to pursue hobbies, exercise and/or social activities. Neighbours were identified by many participants as key supports during the crisis.

3) *The impact of the BSE crisis on farm communities*  
We learned that BSE affected poultry, dairy and

# The Impact of 'mad cow disease' on Farm Family and Community Health

sheep farmers as well as beef farmers and farm communities, families, and industry. The implications of BSE included loss of income, high debt load, selling farms, and changes in feed and equipment sales. These changes affected entire communities: participants witnessed the closure of businesses, fewer services, loss of infrastructure, and relationship strains within their communities. A broader issue of food sustainability was also reported.

4) *Nova Scotia experiences with federal and provincial policies and programs in the context of the BSE crisis and more generally* BSE was seen as the tipping point for an already unstable agricultural industry in Nova Scotia. Closures of regional slaughter/processing facilities prior to BSE were reported as detrimental to Nova Scotia's agricultural industry. National policies were also implicated in this decline as many did not recognize or respond to the area's agricultural distinctiveness. Participants felt the provincial and federal governments were slow to react to BSE and assist farmers effectively. They explained that the assistance programs implemented were confusing, difficult to get access to, and caused more hardship for farmers.

5) *Lack of public awareness of the state of Nova Scotia farming and the BSE crisis*

Participants perceived a need for increased education of the non-farming public about Nova Scotia agriculture and the economic realities of farming. They also felt that the public did not receive accurate or timely information about the state of farming or BSE, contributing to misconceptions about food production, local food sources, and the effects of BSE on farming families and communities.

## What were the recommendations based on the findings?

- Build stronger relationships between farmers and decision-makers by re-establishing regional government representatives who work directly with farmers.
- Provide education for the non-farming public—through events, school curricula, etc.—on the process of food production and the realities of farming.
- Create space and increase support for new models of agriculture, including organic farming, new co-operatives, food levies, and diversification.
- Re-implement local, federally inspected and standardized meat packing and processing plants in Nova Scotia and the Maritime provinces in general.
- Produce accessible information about agricultural programs, policies, and processes and support farmers applying for services.
- Improve planning for agricultural crises and ensure fair and equitable programs for farmers in diverse contexts.
- Increase support for buying Canadian grown and processed foods to advance food security and sovereignty.

## Other resources (National Farm Family Health Research Project)

- Amaratunga, C., Thurston, W.E., Crowe, S., Sindhvani, M., and Farber, A. (2007). How 'Mad Cow' disease affects farm families and communities across Canada. *The Network* (Publication of the Canadian Women's Health Network), 10 (1), 21-22. Available online: <http://www.cwhn.ca/en/node/39388>
- Cook, T.M., Brook, R.K., Sindhvani, M. and Thurston, W.E. (2011). A pilot study of the impact of bovine spongiform encephalopathy on the future of rural youth and Canadian farming. *Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health*, 74 (2): 248-260/
- Mitra, D., Amaratunga, C., Sutherns, R., Pletsch, V., Corneil, W., Crowe, S., and Krewski, D. (2009). The psychosocial and socioeconomic consequences of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE): A community impact study. *Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health, Part A*, 72 (17): 80-103.