November 3, 2003

The Honourable Lyle Vanclief, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food
Sir John Carling Building
930 Carling Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0C5
Fax: (613) 759-1081

Dear Mr. Vanclief:

I am writing to you on behalf of The United Church of Canada to convey to you our continuing concern for food producers and food industry workers affected by the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis, and indeed by the larger crisis affecting all agricultural producers in Canada. In August of this year, over four hundred commissioners representing approximately 3500 United Church congregations from across Canada gathered at our 38th General Council. At that meeting, they specifically raised concerns over the BSE crisis and asked us to convey these concerns to you. This request has been reaffirmed at the meeting of our General Council Executive that ended today.

At the same time, we wish to express our appreciation for the efforts that the Government of Canada has made to reopen borders to exports of Canadian beef and livestock. We encourage you to diligently continue these efforts in the hope that exports can soon return to full normality.

Even if all these efforts are successful, however, we believe that the Government of Canada needs to expand its support for those adversely affected by BSE crisis in coordination with provincial governments. This support could take the form of cash advances to those producers who most urgently need them as well as a revenue deficiency programme to backstop these cash advances. We ask that you prioritise assistance to smaller producers whose predicament is particularly serious at this time. Given the high level of indebtedness of many of these producers, it is important to ensure that not all support takes the form of loans, but that it also include provisions for outright grants and debt cancellation to those most in need.

As well, we ask you to continue efforts to ensure that Canada's food safety meet the highest standards in the world. We urge you continue to find ways of improving food safety, putting into practice the precautionary principle as a central tenet of our regulatory system. We ask that you consider measures taken in other parts of the world - such as the European Union - designed to ensure that BSE-infected material cannot find its way into any animal feed (for example, by banning the use of meat and bone meal in all animal feed). Not only might such measures strengthen our own food safety standards, they could also reassure those export markets still reluctant to accept Canadian beef and cattle exports that it is indeed safe to do so.

Finally, we ask that you look at the BSE crisis within the context of the wider agricultural and rural crisis in Canada - a crisis that has been exacerbated in recent years by a number of factors including adverse weather conditions, low farm prices, and trade-related difficulties. In particular, we urge you to improve the current Business Risk Management framework so that it can more adequately address farm income risks. To do so, we suggest that you initiate a process that involves producers - including small producers -- in the design and implementation of programmes that are both affordable and flexible, and which include livestock production as well as crops. We also urge you to implement additional programmes designed to cover situations of catastrophic losses outside of the Business Risk Management envelope.

Thank you for giving your attention to these urgent matters. We look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely yours,
Mark Hathaway
Food Security Programme Staff
The United Church of Canada

CC:

- Prime Minister Jean Chrétien
- Provincial Ministers of Agriculture

See Also:
"United Church identifies Canada's rural crisis as a critical concern" (News Release)