



COMMENTARY

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Are Conservation & Biosecurity in Conflict?

November 16, 2007

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The purpose of the recent Auditor General’s report was to “evaluate Conservation’s operational efforts” to protect the environment from potential livestock contamination. One of the key recommendations is for the department to follow through with on-farm inspections to ensure they’re meeting the regulations and standards that are in place. Fair enough. KAP has always said that there must be solid enforcement so that farmers and the public can have confidence in what we do.

What the report fails to mention – even in passing – is the potential livestock disease risk that could be unwittingly transferred by inspection officers from farm to farm as the number of on-site visits increase. With the increased awareness of biosecurity and foreign animal diseases, it’s surprising and disappointing that this isn’t included as a matter of course with any call for increased enforcement and on-farm visits. In short, a focus on environmental protection without an equal focus on biosecurity creates a very real and dangerous risk to animal and human health.

Most animal diseases can spread in ways that can be mitigated, but only if the proper care and caution is taken by people who visit farms. This is particularly true for people like environment officers, who may try to visit more than one farm in a day and may not be familiar with agricultural biosecurity guidelines. The liability back to the department and the financial consequences for producers would be enormous in the event of an outbreak.

The report also says that Conservation needs to improve its track record of working with other government departments. If they’re not talking about regulations, it’s also very likely that they’re not talking with Manitoba Agriculture, Food & Rural Initiatives about the dangers of cross-contamination and biosecurity protocols. That has to change now, before an outbreak of a contagious disease puts a spotlight back on the department.

KAP recently developed a document that outlines biosecurity protocols that farmers can put in place for their farm, and a list of practices that farm visitors – including inspectors and environment officers – should follow. We all agree that we have to protect the environment, but let’s also follow a few rules to protect our health and the health of our animals.