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As anyone close to the cattle industry knew, the first American case of BSE was only a matter of time.

While Washington was quick to point the finger at Canada, the herd of origin of the BSE-positive cow — culled in early December from a 4,000 head dairy in Washington State — is irrelevant; risk profiles of the US and Canadian herd are identical.

If Canada has BSE, the Americans have BSE – possibly up to 100 cases according to Harvard's risk assessment. Until banned in August 1997, cattle in both countries consumed feed containing ruminant by-products, exposing all of them to a one-in-a-million risk of contracting BSE.

Finally the shoe is on the other foot, the Americans are scrambling to implement measures already in place here, and this gives Canada critical leverage.

Instead of closing our border completely — as the US did to Canada last May, as other countries are now doing to the US under OIE sanctions— Canada has instead wisely chosen to honour our NAFTA commitments, imposing a partial ban pending independent scientific analysis and risk assessment. In Canada's case, this took less than a month. And when the international panel gave us a clean bill of health last June 26th, the US border should have been immediately and fully reopened.

Once cleared by sound science and risk assessment, American ranchers will have the same NAFTA rights of access to Canada's markets as our ranchers – for seven months and counting – should have had to US markets.

What a perfect opportunity to show the Americans how international affairs should be conducted. Playing the role of "fair broker", Canada should continue to honour our NAFTA commitments, reopen our border on a clean report from the international panel, and embarrass the Americans into doing the same.

We wish Ag Minister Bob Speller much luck in the coming weeks in his efforts to bring this fiasco to a quick and effective end.