

# The missing calculation: the human cost

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## Summary

The incursion of a foreign animal disease into any country produces devastating impacts on the country and on its producing industry. Although the associated financial losses to the country and its industry inevitably are calculated, the result in compensation to producers is often inadequate. Above and beyond the financial accounting calculations, however, there is a tremendously destructive and overwhelming impact that has been essentially ignored. That is the profound social impact and the real human cost to individual producers in the livestock industry and their families. Any decision to employ mass animal destruction as an animal disease control strategy must take this fundamental human element into full consideration. The author describes the consequences and depth of personal impact that the stamping-out approach has produced on affected individual livestock producers.

## Keywords

Animal disease outbreaks, Animal disposal, Costs, Exotic diseases, Farming communities, Social impact, Stamping out.

## Il calcolo mancante: il costo umano

### Riassunto

*L'insorgenza di una malattia esotica in un qualunque paese ha effetti devastanti sul paese stesso e sul suo settore industriale. Sebbene le perdite finanziarie provocate dalla malattia al paese ed alla sua industria vengano sempre calcolate, l'indennizzo dei produttori risulta spesso inadeguato. Al di là dei calcoli finanziari esiste comunque un impatto distruttivo e travolgente che*

*è stato in pratica ignorato fino ad ora. Si tratta del vero e proprio impatto sociale e del reale costo umano sopportato dai singoli allevatori e dalle loro famiglie. Qualunque decisione che comporti la distruzione di massa come strategia di controllo della malattia deve necessariamente prendere in considerazione questo fondamentale elemento umano. L'autore descrive le conseguenze e la profondità dell'impatto che lo stamping out ha avuto sui singoli allevatori che lo hanno subito.*

### Parole chiave

Comunità rurali, Costi, Focolai di malattie animali, Impatto sociale, Malattie esotiche, Smaltimento animale, Stamping out.

## The human cost of a foreign animal disease

Many countries around the world have faced the devastating effects of a foreign animal disease incursion. Calculating the cost of the event to the industry, to government and to individuals, has been an exercise that recognises the financial losses. However, there is one calculation that has been sorely neglected in the case of a foreign animal disease incursion and that is the very real human cost to the individuals involved.

A prime example of this neglect is the considerable effort that has been devoted to calculating the financial cost of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) to the Canadian economy. Industry representatives and government departments have analysed the economic impact on all commodities, livestock support industries, rural communities and all levels of government. The discovery of BSE in Canada has thrust cattle producers across the country into a state of

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uncertainty. This affected every producer, regardless of the size of his or her operation, whether it was a feedlot, grasser or cow-calf operation. The uncertainty affected every aspect of the personal and business lives of producers. It is no exaggeration to say that producers will never again view their industry or their livelihood in the same light. The impact is in no way unique to Canadian producers or limited to any one specific disease.

## **The impacts on producers and their families**

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Producers in the livestock industry rely heavily on market indicators when deciding to sell their product. The strength of currency, grain prices, cattle futures and the statistics of cattle on feed all influence producers when they market their production. During a disease event, these indicators are all so significantly affected that the cattle cycle, from a producer's viewpoint, simply disappears. The impact of consumer demand, domestic processing capacity and international trading requirements become the priorities that must be considered. The uncertainty that follows leaves experienced and normally confident marketers feeling ill prepared and unable to plan effectively. During the outset of a disease incursion, producers face the daily impact of news reports, laboratory results or investigation findings. Any single piece of information can stimulate an irrational response in the already volatile marketplace. The result is unequivocal fear for the future viability of their cattle operations and for their capacity to sustain their operations and provide for their families.

A foreign animal disease event that leads to the destruction of animals for disease control purposes or for animal welfare reasons causes an added burden on farm families. Individuals express their concerns in a variety of ways. Losing not only the herd but also the long and carefully established genetics, and having to witness the loading or the slaughter of animals are offensive. The impact on children can be very damaging, particularly when family pets

are included in the destruction order. Farmers report feelings of isolation and rejection by family, friends and neighbours. Lack of information and support, and the speed with which these events unfold can contribute to an already untenable situation.

### **Emotional/psychological effects**

Individuals express feelings of guilt related to the impact on the family, community and industry. Peer pressure can add to the stress felt by families that find themselves on a 'diseased' farm or in a 'diseased' area. During times of crisis, it is clear that people are bombarded with an assortment of emotions. Like losing a loved one, the crisis can set in motion a grieving process that can prove to be long and difficult. The outcome is ongoing and can create prolonged periods of exposure to stress, anxiety and fear. The impact can be translated into physical, emotional or psychological consequences.

### **Financial difficulties**

Mass herd destruction leads to financial distress. Farming families face dramatic choices when their immediate cash flow is disrupted and their long-term viability is in question. All members of a farming family are affected by the stress and financial difficulties. Cuts in household and personal expenditures are swift and deep. The inability to pay friends, neighbours and local businesses weighs heavily on producers. Loss of identity or social status can result and there is often a withdrawal from community and social events. Family holidays and recreational activities are rapidly removed from the list of priorities. Finding the means to support children seeking to pursue post-secondary education can become difficult and, in some cases, students postpone their educational goals and seek job opportunities with hopes of returning to their studies later. All relationships feel the strain.

Government programmes, though helpful and appreciated, are viewed as a 'handout' or 'welfare', something that is rejected out of pride except in extreme circumstances. The response programmes are ad hoc, alter the marketplace and offer short-term solutions at a

time when producers are seeking stability and security.

No producer, regardless of age or previous financial security is spared from the challenges faced in a crisis. Older producers are forced to draw from their equity, knowing full well that the only retirement fund they had will quickly disappear with little chance of it ever being regained.

Young producers question the viability and long-term impact on their operation, as they scramble to secure financial support. These individuals are often in a better position to seek alternative employment. Financial challenges can force them into deciding to leave the farm or to work off the farm. The challenge, however, of meeting the needs of both working and farming is one few producers can manage.

### **Perspectives for young farmers**

Perhaps the fear that weighs heaviest on some is that the younger generation will not view the livestock industry as a secure alternative for their future. Selling the assets of a farm, that was owned by several generations and that represents a life's work, may become necessary. Those decisions can cause discord between generations of a family.

### **Other societal impacts**

The support and response for individuals is not always readily available in many

jurisdictions. Medical professionals must have a heightened awareness to respond to the varied and sometimes subtle symptoms. The costs to the health care system can be significant and long term. The consequential social impact can range from domestic violence, marital and family breakdowns to suicide.

## **Conclusions**

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The financial challenges faced by producers who find their industry involved in a foreign animal disease incursion are recognised. The calculation of income lost to producers during a disaster is a relatively easy accounting exercise. Determining the price paid by individuals and their families is much more complex. The consequence for these individuals can be unique, varied and determined by personality and personal situations that are too numerous to identify. There is no mathematical equation to recognise the human cost of a foreign animal disease event. Therefore, for the most part, producers and their families carry this burden alone, a largely unrecognised but devastating human burden.

