

Sep 10, 2008

Bovine Belching Latest Tax Sinkhole

What started with a strange tip ended up in 2000 pages of documents. The rumour? Researchers at a federal facility near Swift Current were putting gas masks on cows to monitor their greenhouse gas emissions. Freedom of Information Requests proved that not only was this true, but that many such studies have and are being conducted—mostly paid for by taxpayers.

From 2003 to 2008, Agriculture and Agrifood Canada (AAFC) conducted its bovine greenhouse gas project, with much of the research done at the Semiarid Prairie Agricultural Research Centre (SPARC) near Swift Current. The project entitled, "Carbon Sequestration, Methane Production and Nitrous Oxide Emission from cattle grazing native prairie" is one of many done by 16 researchers at the facility.

Dr. Alan Iwassa headed the project and revamped a gas mask design invented in New Zealand. The new and improved yoke, halter, and tube cost \$315 apiece and measure the methane that cows belch. Although burping accounts for up to 98 percent of the methane total, researchers also measured feces, urine, soil samples, and the air above grazing areas to try to get a wider picture.

A full financial picture for this project has not yet emerged. Third-party contributors were blanked out, but the documents show that from 2004-2007, the federal contribution was \$256,063. And there's more.

Another project at SPARC from 2001-2005 aimed for the "Re-Establishment of a Mixed Native Grassland in Southwest Saskatchewan" all to capture carbon in the soil. In addition to federal contributions, SaskPower kicked in \$20,000 for this project, and Saskatchewan's Agricultural Development Fund (ADF) gave \$65,892.

The ADF topped-up \$189,500 for another AAFC project, a three-year study that examined how a new additive could reduce methane emissions in cows.

Why all this effort and expense? It starts with Kyoto. The Greenhouse Gas Mitigation Program for Canadian Agriculture is part of the federal Action Plan 2000 on Climate Change. Yes, Ottawa believes that farmers must change their ways to save the earth.

Studies thus far have shown that steers grazing early in the year belch less greenhouse gases. High quality feed, edible oils, and mixed grazing lands of alfalfa and grass also produced measurably better results.

But how relevant are such findings? Not very. According to the government's own documents, agriculture is responsible for 9 percent of Canada's annual greenhouse gas emissions. Animal belches account for just 2.6 percent of the total.

To bolster their case, researchers insist lower methane emissions mean cattle have wasted less energy to digest their

feed, and, therefore, will gain weight more efficiently. And so, one article amongst the documents began, "Reducing your herd's methane emissions could prevent the polar ice caps from melting but it will certainly improve your bottomline."

Can farmers take this seriously? Has education drove these researchers mad? No and no. What scientists understand is that the key to research dollars is a climate change angle in their proposal. Even if the results make little difference, governments can point to X number of dollars for climate change research to prove they are tackling the supposed problem.

Where is all this headed? Carbon taxes, carbon credits, and increased regulation. The federal government is already working to produce on a National Carbon and Greenhouse Gas Emission Accounting System (NCGAVS) to monitor all carbon emissions nationwide. Furthermore, development has already begun on a computer program where farmers enter their GPS, the acreage for each kind of sown crop, their use of manure, and the numbers of each kind of livestock.

A tax on livestock belching and flatulence may be next. All to save the earth, of course.

--Lee Harding, Sask Director