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Food Safety Issues in Canada

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Canadians enjoy the highest possible level of food safety. Despite this fact, there is a public perception and concern about the potential presence of chemical residues in foods and the possible presence of bacteria, such as salmonella and *Histeria*.

In recent years, significant developments have influenced the perceptions that consumers have about food safety. A technological explosion has provided a capacity to detect bacterial contamination and chemical residues in increasingly small amounts. At the same time, there has been an increasing awareness of the possible effects of man-made substances on the air we breathe and the food we eat and drink. This awareness has resulted in a shift in emphasis among consumers from concern over visible defects and grading of food products to concern about invisible chemical residues and bacterial presence in food products. Since consumers cannot see for themselves that food is free of residues, they expect the inspection services to provide this assurance. The fact that the consumer's perceptions about the relative risks of food additives, veterinary drugs, pesticides, environmental contaminants, and microbiological hazards are the exact reverse of the opinions of scientists points out the need to consult with and provide better information to the public. The public would then be better able to assess the relative importance of food safety issues and make informed decisions.

Reviews of Canada's Food Inspection System

In 1985 a Ministerial Task Force reviewed the food inspection program in Canada and determined that there was an effective food inspection system and there was justification in the public having a high level of confidence in that system. The review did indicate that while the Department of Health and Welfare Canada has primacy for the safety and nutrition of food, there was a broad range of shared accountability involving the four federal food departments. A further review of the Canadian food inspection system was conducted in 1988, and the

need to share accountability for the health and safety of food, the management of risks, and the implementation of appropriate monitoring techniques was emphasized. The auditor general's report (1988) of the Food Production and Inspection Branch of Agriculture Canada again provided a positive summary but indicated that there was need for strengthening of certain areas of activity.

In 1989 Mr. Mazankowski, the minister of agriculture, initiated a broad agricultural policy review based on four principles: (1) that the developed policy should stimulate self-reliance within industry; (2) that the policy should create an atmosphere of market responsiveness; (3) that there should be a recognition of the regional diversity of the various areas of Canada; and (4) that the policy should reflect the need for agricultural and environmental sustainability.

Food safety was one of the aspects of activity of the department that was reviewed under this general policy review and the resulting committee developed recommendations on the basis of the minister's four principles. Specifically, the committee recommended that Canada's inspection and food safety systems should ensure that responsibility is properly shared by all participants in the food chain, from input supplier through the producer and the processor to and including the consumer. The system should be more open, allowing for the direct involvement of both consumers and industry through not only a broad consultative mechanism, but also by providing improved access to reports of inspection and audit reports that are generated within the system. The committee recognized that Agriculture Canada's food safety standards and inspection methods must meet all internationally recognized levels and that, in fact, this also gave further opportunity for Canada to provide input to the deliberations of bodies such as the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which has the objective to establish high uniform standards internationally.

Another specific recommendation of the committee was that Agriculture Canada must continue to improve the system of assessing agri-food products and processes of foreign countries and companies shipping to Canada. In point of fact, this

for the assessment of the legal authorities and inspection systems of those countries exporting to Canada after which time the reported systems and procedures could be verified by on-site inspections. The process is designed to ensure the highest level of safety of imported products, but would enable the department to concentrate inspection resources, including monitoring through laboratory testing, to the highest areas of risk.

In supporting the food safety endeavours of the department, significant emphasis has been placed on intensifying the monitoring through laboratory testing. This has called for the development of an accreditation system of private laboratories and the contracting out to these accredited laboratories of particular tests, be it for pesticides or for bacterial determination. In addition, the department has moved into the development of rapid tests and where rapid tests have been confirmed as being valid, the use of such tests has been extended to the field inspection staff. An example of the application of a rapid test is the one applied for the determination of sulfa drug residues in meat products. Currently, there is active research into the development of a rapid test for the detection of salmonella bacteria. The department takes the position that the development of rapid tests and the subsequent application at the field level provide an effective and cost-beneficial alternative screening process,

and preserves sophisticated laboratory testing for confirmation of the residue or contamination level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that consumer sensitivity and concerns for food safety and quality have increased in recent years. At the same time, it is also evident that there has been substantial progress in quality assurance systems and processes. Industry and government have been responding to consumer health concerns. There has been improved cooperation and coordination among all partners and players in the food chain, and the decision-making systems within government are becoming more open and transparent. Notwithstanding these developments, which are assuring Canadians of the safety of the food supply, it must still be appreciated that since food production and consumption are part of biological processes, perfection cannot be 100 percent guaranteed. The Department of Agriculture—and, indeed, the Government of Canada—is continuing to address the concerns of consumers in all respects and will continue to provide not only effective inspection systems, but provide information to the consumer on all issues pertaining to food safety and quality, so that the consumer can develop an improved basis for making informed consumption decisions.