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Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

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•(1605)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC)): I would like to continue our subcommittee's study on food safety, and I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here today.

We'll go with ladies first and turn it over to Ms. Tricia Meaud and Ms. Anne Fowlie from the Agriculture and Food Council of Alberta.

Welcome. Could you keep your presentation to ten minutes or less, please?

Ms. Tricia Meaud (Deputy Executive Director, Federal Programs, Agriculture and Food Council of Alberta): Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you as well, members, for inviting us here today.

Let me begin by giving you some background on the role of the Agriculture and Food Council of Alberta.

The council is a non-profit society formed in 1994. It is an industry-led organization made up of volunteer member representatives from across Alberta's agrifood industry, including a student member and ex-officio members from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. An election is held every spring to replace members whose terms have expired. The council represents a diagonal slice of the agrifood industry in Alberta and includes members from the production, processing, retail, and research sectors as well as other sections of the value chain.

The council is a catalyst for the agrifood industry to encourage growth, sustainability, competitiveness, and profitability. The council assists the industry to achieve long-term stability, sustainability, and profitability through programs and services that enable the modernization needed to compete in this constantly changing and complex global environment.

This is accomplished through several programs, including advancing Canadian agriculture and agrifood, ACAAF; the innovation in agribusiness management fund; the advanced leadership and management development program; and human resource projects.

Past projects have included a value chain initiative, the environmental policy initiative program; and administering the Canadian adaptation and rural development fund, CARD, and the biofuels opportunities for producers initiative, BOPI.

The council acts as a policy forum, providing a platform where ideas and information can be exchanged and policy options developed and where industry members can engage one another, stakeholders, and the public. The council also annually undertakes a strategic planning session and subsequently drafts a strategic and business plan. Several presenters this year and in past years have highlighted food safety as a priority.

One of the council's main activities is administering the ACAAF program on behalf of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. ACAAF was launched in 2004 as a successor to the CARD program. It was a five-year program with total funding of \$240 million, ending March 31, 2009, and granting approximately \$29 million in Alberta. The objectives of ACAAF were to expand the sector's capacity to respond to current and emerging issues, position the sector to capture market opportunities, actively and continuously engage the sector to contribute to future agriculture and agrifood policy directions, and integrate sector-led projects tested and piloted under ACAAF into future government or industry initiatives.

There is a sister council in every province and territory across Canada, with two in Quebec. Industry councils have identified project proposals that had broad application, and when more than one council shared the same priority, these projects were considered under what is called the collective outcomes process. The council is thankful for the funding received from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada for the CARD, BOPI, and ACAAF programs and is in the process of working with our counterparts within the department on the development of a successor program.

Through CARD and ACAAF, the council has funded several industry-led projects in food safety. Those include several workshops on HACCP, on-farm food safety pilot programs, piloting the food safety information society, and projects to test new processes and technologies for food safety, including high-pressure processing, new product development to meet regulatory requirements, and several projects involving evaluating disinfectants in processing plants.

I would like to briefly highlight two of these projects for you. The Alberta technology innovation program from Food Beverage Canada was funded through ACAAF in the winter of 2006. It is a program to provide opportunities for small and medium-sized processing companies to access, explore, and evaluate leading-edge technologies related to food safety, environment, processes, packaging, labelling, and storage. It is based on a 50-50 cost share of eligible expenses and has funded over 300 participants to attend over 100 events to date, resulting in companies investing in new processes, modified products, increased technical knowledge, and business partnerships.

Another project we funded that may be of interest to this group is the control of biofilm microorganisms on surfaces associated with meat processing facilities. This project was from Innovotech. It was also a project funded in the winter of 2006 with our sister councils in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and the Quebec food processors council. Completed in the fall of 2008, this project developed and investigated the efficiency of different commercially available disinfectant combinations on primary and secondary processing surfaces in slaughterhouses. The company is continuing to disseminate results, and the project has led to subsequent projects. More information on either of these projects is also available, and I can provide you with some of the recommendations from these projects as well.

As these projects highlight, the council's projects often involve partnerships between industry and provincial and federal governments, including Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency when appropriate. They have tested ideas that have subsequently been funded and taken up by industry.

We have also been able to engage industry in food safety through some of our other activities. Several of our value chain projects involve traceability, and we have also been invited to participate with groups as they have developed biosecurity programs.

As you are aware, our knowledge around food safety issues is constantly evolving and expanding. I'll keep my presentation brief, as I am not the lead on these projects, but I can speak to them as well. It is the council's point of view that funding innovative research projects in these areas that are led by industry at a grassroots level allows for research and results to have an impact on the key stakeholders in a timely fashion that meets their needs.

The approach is proactive and allows the industry to have a significant impact on the direction and dissemination of research, which ultimately increases the likelihood of its uptake. With its cross-sectional representation, the council is available to assist in the dissemination of information to a wide audience.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll turn it over to Mr. Kyte, or did you have something to add further, Ms. Fowlie?

Ms. Anne Fowlie (Executive Vice-President, Canadian Horticultural Council): No. I'll be making a presentation as well.

The Chair: Here I had you lumped in the same organization. I should have known better. You're from the Canadian Horticultural Council. Please go ahead. You have 10 minutes.

I'm sorry about that. I'll put my glasses on.

• (1610)

[Translation]

Ms. Anne Fowlie: On behalf of Steve Levasseur, my president and an apple producer from Frelighsburg, Quebec, I thank you for the invitation. Being an apple producer, and with the temperature as it is today, he is out in the fields.

[English]

The Canadian Horticultural Council is the national association representing the producers of fresh fruits and vegetables in Canada. What I would like to address with you here today is food safety in Canada's horticultural sector.

In 1999 our association, through the board of directors, made a decision to take a proactive and leadership role in the development and dissemination of an on-farm food safety program for those who grow, pack, and store the abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables enjoyed by Canadians. Since then we have accomplished a great deal. Thousands of on-farm food safety manuals have been distributed on farms across Canada, and a very conservative guesstimate of that is at least 5,000, and quite possibly more.

I must note that the accomplishments would not have been possible without the collaboration and support, in financial resources and technical expertise, of both Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

The Government of Canada has made considerable investment in helping industry develop the program. The importance of this support cannot be emphasized enough. It is critical that such support continue into the future and be available to early adopters and those who must now update those programs, as well as those who are either new to the program or implementing it in a more formal way.

Our role in on-farm food safety has been to provide the tools to enable and facilitate the sector to respond and compete in the marketplace in Canada and beyond. Our mandate was to deliver a realistic, cost-effective, voluntary, and market-driven program based on member input and needs. It would seek to minimize the risk of contamination from produce grown in Canada, make a positive contribution to the safety of the Canadian food supply, and ensure consumer confidence. It would need to be technically sound and credible, created through a transparent process, founded on the best available science, and be a buyer-recognized standard.

It was a huge undertaking for a sector that includes over 120 different fruit and vegetable crops. In order to organize and facilitate the process, the crops were grouped into eight commodity-specific manuals, each with its own generic HACCP model. The result was the implementation of a four-year strategic phase-in of one program for horticulture in Canada, owned by the council on behalf of members.

A supply chain approach is key, and we established and relied on the links between programs both up and down the supply chain. We have striven for mutual recognition of programs by supply chain partners. It is important that programs take a common approach that is HACCP-based, technically sound, and auditable. Programs must be market-driven and responsive to consumer expectations.

The CFIA role, which we have supported, is to lead the government recognition program for on-farm food safety programs developed by national producer associations. This includes establishing the criteria for a technically sound HACCP-based program and having a recognition system in place to do in-depth technical reviews to ensure credible risk-based programs.

As of May 1 of this year, we are awaiting closure and CFIA sign-off on our leafy green and small fruit programs. The technical review process for our final modules is under way. Technical review of the on-farm programs by government will continue to be key to their credibility. There is a role for CFIA and Agriculture Canada to play in actively promoting the government's role in program recognition to an international audience.

The government recognition program provided CHC with the context to proceed as we did to develop a national HACCP-based program. That has helped our members respond to market pressures and be proactive in addressing food safety concerns.

Participation is market-driven. We have a certification component, and as of December, nearly 300 producers have been certified to the program. There is additional detail on the certification program, the audit protocols, and so forth in the packages you have.

The program has been endorsed by several major potato processing companies, including McCain Foods Canada, Simplot, Lamb Weston, and just recently Loblaw Companies Limited, a major Canadian retailer.

For further information, I again encourage you to see the documents or visit our website.

●(1615)

I'd like to talk a little bit about the international context, because for us it is very important. Trade in fresh produce is global, and food safety is an international concern. Our proactive initiatives extend beyond Canadian borders to ensure industry competitiveness and influence and to position the Canadian HACCP-based approach as a model internationally. Global benchmarking of our program is a goal, and we have indeed initiated the process with both GlobalGAP and the global food safety initiative.

On benchmarking, in the spirit of a supply chain approach, stakeholders in the Canadian fresh produce industry—our group, the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, and the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors—have agreed that food safety should be a non-competitive matter. The best means of achieving this is to have credible HACCP-based national food safety programs all along the supply chain and, in due course, recognize each other's national programs and promote food safety equally between domestic fresh produce and imported fresh produce.

We initiated a joint comparison project in 2007 entitled "Comparing Canada's National Industry-led Food Safety Programs

in the Fresh Produce Sector with Food Safety Programs Available in Importing Countries". If you'd like a copy, I'd be pleased to provide you with one. It showed that Canada was clearly a leader and had much to be proud of. There was significant interest in the report.

The CHC belongs to a group called the International Federation for Produce Standards. It was formed in 2006 to provide an international forum for the produce industry to address areas requiring standardization across international borders. The primary focus included food safety; good agricultural practices; harmonization; and produce identification, including the PLU stickers—the data bar codes you find on a number of things. A lot of those things are channelled through that group.

Membership comprises a number of groups: the Chilean Association of Exporters, CHC, the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, the Fresh Produce Consortium in the U.K., Fruit South Africa, Horticulture Australia, a group in Norway—I must apologize that I cannot properly pronounce the name—the Produce Marketing Association in the U.S., and United Fresh in New Zealand.

At our annual meeting in April we had clear consensus on the following points related to food safety: a single set of internationally recognized criteria against which food safety programs are benchmarked should be established; the outcome must encompass the total fresh produce supply chain; and one global benchmarking system is preferable for the produce sector.

I'm sure traceability is also something of interest to you. We participated in an initiative related specifically to produce in a North American trade task force to establish a global fruit and vegetable traceability implementation guide. This was a joint venture between Canada and the U.S. involving retailers and grower associations. We achieved that in 18 months. There is a document that is being finalized and will be available in July. It is a global recipe for benchmarking data-set capture and so on, which is very important. Trade moves very fluidly, and it's important to be capturing the same data.

In summary, resources are required to help the Canadian produce industry implement and sustain the program for farms across Canada. The program is costly to run, and the technical components need ongoing revision to maintain currency with developing science. Current projections show that our program will be running a deficit for at least the first five years, with debt accumulating until year eight.

Investment is required for Canadian industry to contribute to and be involved in the direction of industry-driven standards here at home and internationally.

There are also a number of research needs in the area of on-farm food safety for fresh produce. Many questions have yet to be answered definitively, and investment is needed to advance studies in those areas. In 2008, a priority list was compiled by Health Canada, CFIA, CHC, and the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, and it is available on Health Canada's website.

• (1620)

With that, thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, from the Food Processors of Canada, we have Mr. Kyte. You have ten minutes.

Mr. Christopher Kyte (President, Food Processors of Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank the members for inviting me, and I'd like to thank the clerk for multiplying the copies. We processors can't count.

Food Processors of Canada got its start back in 1947. We provided assistance to freezers, canners, and the vegetable industry, and we have moved on to value-added products today. We represent only Canadian processors or processors actually making things in Canada and making investment decisions in Canada. We do not represent any foreign interests who do not make investment decisions in this country. Our members make dinners, entrees, pizzas, french fries, frozen foods—all of today's foods. We export to 80 countries in 23 different languages.

The agrifood business is a huge business. There are 210 associations representing it. If you look at the primary production, farm gate receipts are \$46 billion, and for product processed at the factory level it's \$87 billion. It's a \$133 billion industry, and that's a very big industry.

We have over 5,000 plants, but only 2,300 of them are federally registered. In other words, only 2,300 are actually supervised or inspected by the CFIA. That's kind of interesting. You don't really have control over plant inspection in this country.

FPC conducted a study a few years ago. The 227,000 full-time jobs in the food processing industry created another 796,000 jobs in the Canadian economy. That's incredible. That's the number of jobs we *created*. We put in \$18 billion in taxes, which is well over and above any subsidies the producers get, I think. The retail and food service businesses are \$137 billion. Just to put a perspective on that—and some of the figures may change, because I got updates from Agriculture and from CFIA yesterday—the number of facilities selling food or preparing food...there are 22,000 grocery stores and another 79,000 food service outlets. That represents a huge number of people involved in food, and again, those are not federally inspected.

Consumers want to know—and there are a lot of discussions around “product of Canada” and everything else—if food is safe, wholesome, what they think it is, and the right price. Before I get into the crux of my discussion, I want to state that Canadian food is safe. Statistics show that recalls are declining. You have a chart that we just distributed today. These figures are from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the office of recalls. It shows that the recalls are declining.

There are two interesting statistics. One shows that they are declining and the other shows that 50% of all the recalls come from imports. That's kind of interesting, because we can justify how much we invest in plant inspection, but we can't justify what we're not spending at the border. We import 23% of the food we consume, and that results in 50% of the recalls. The Canadian food safety system works.

The CFIA is the most important department in the government. If you took National Defence and dropped it off in the middle of the Atlantic, nobody would notice it was gone for a couple of months. However, if the CFIA wasn't working or working well, we wouldn't be able to ship food tomorrow. We think that Carole Swan and her team have tough jobs, and they're doing the best they can. We feel they're stretched, and we'll talk a bit about that in a few minutes. That department supports a \$133 billion industry. We've talked about that. There are relatively few incidents.

Companies, not governments, make safe food. They make food safe. Canadian companies' standards are higher than government standards. If you looked at this room, you would say that this floor is the government's standard, the minimum standard. The ceiling in this room is the consumer's expectation.

We're inspected not just by the federal government. We have our own QA people. We have our own systems. We have our own protocols. And we're inspected by customers and by other governments.

• (1625)

The customers have high expectations for our plants, and if we don't meet their expectations, we can't ship to their stores. Our name is on the product, so there's instant accountability there, as we've seen.

The Canadian food safety system is more efficient today than it's ever been, and you're talking to somebody who's had some experience through a number of ministers right through to today. I have to tell you that it's easier to do business and to work with the Food Inspection Agency and Health Canada now that there are only two entities. There used to be 36 decision-makers in 8 different departments every time you wanted to change a regulation. Now, if you want to reduce impurities in fish food, you can sit down with the CFIA and Health Canada and you'd make a decision overnight.

We also feel that because agriculture is not involved in the day-to-day workings of the CFIA and other departments, the decisions are more pure. There's less interference.

System advances are taking place all the time—HACCP, ISO, detection systems, DNA testing, internal communications—so the system continues to improve, and that's really what we're seeing today. Coming out of these hearings, we hope to see more improvements to the system.

The new listeria policy is one more advancement, but we don't believe the listeria policy goes far enough. It doesn't cover enough categories. It doesn't cover provincial plants. It's not enforceable on imports, and I think that's the next step to improve this listeria policy. So if I were to make recommendations, I'd say based on our experience we need strategic improvements to food inspection, not wholesale changes, because I think it's all about continuous improvement.

Import control is the consumer's best defence. Take a look: 50% of the recalls are imports, yet only 23% of food consumed is imports. There's an imbalance there. The CFIA is cancelling its meat import control program. We have a problem with that and we're fighting that vigorously. The only other association that's vigorously challenging that with us is Robert de Valk's group, the Further Poultry Processors Association of Canada. We want to see that program maintained, and that's connected to the pre-market label review program. We think that should be not only maintained but strengthened. It's your best defence. It's the best enforcement program, the most cost-effective enforcement program the government has today. It's HACCP-based. It's prevention.

The market enforcement—we talked about that. You can't go from a 13-person, 100% meat control at the border to inspecting 22,000 stores and 79,000 food service outlets. You cannot do it. You can't do it.

There's one other area. We'd like to see the agency have more enforcement staff and more of a mandate or more of...give them hormones or something. But we are finding a lot of mislabelled products on the marketplace and we'd like to see those enforced, and we bring it to their attention. Other than that, the system works.

We'd also like to see an upgrade of the capacity and the capability of the department. We're finding that the senior management are way too stretched to sit down and have a proactive discussion about enforcement, consumer labelling, or any of those kinds of things. You can't have more than an hour of somebody's time, and already their minds are on the next issue. So we've noticed there's a big change over time.

The other thing we've seen is that there's an eroding knowledge base, and that's just because of the attrition that's taken place since 1993. You used to have a huge number of people from the private sector who got into government back in the seventies. They're all gone, and you're left without the depth we used to have. If you want to get into some examples, I can do that. But one of the examples you will see, and you probably have seen it already, is where process—i.e., we had a committee meeting and everybody agreed—overrides content, because there isn't the capability of providing good content.

•(1630)

I'd just like to say that one thing that is also missing, and that hasn't been around for a number of years, is the striving for best decisions—not the right decision, not the politically correct decision, but the best decision for the consumer, for the processor, for the issue.

The last point I would like to make is about communication. Communication is a funny thing. You know, when I look at the

Canadian Medical Association Journal—we all remember the editorial that came out last August, and the draft copy that hit the news—I see a disconnect between the editorial in the journal and the articles in the body of the magazine pertaining to plant inspection and listeria. There's quite a good, informative, thoughtful piece on listeria and what it is. They actually have a good discussion on plant inspection practices. It's quite different from the editorial.

There's one thing that probably disturbed us the most. When we had the BSE issue, the government was there in full force. You had Brian Evans out discussing it. You had the minister out. We felt really good. You got the message out to the consumers. They ate more beef. But we didn't see that in listeria. Michael McCain ended up being the Canadian government's spokesperson. We're not sure that was right.

Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Easter, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, folks, for coming.

You people, or certainly the processors, are from the part of the food chain that's under somewhat of an investigation, I guess; the horticulture or the vegetable industry, not so much.

I want to begin by saying why we're holding this committee hearing. Basically, the opposition had no confidence in the kind of investigation that the Government of Canada set up through Ms. Weatherill. She doesn't have the authority to subpoena documents or to subpoena witnesses, and she reports to the very minister who is really, to a great extent, being investigated. And this week we found out, in response to information that she provided to this committee, that six of the senior staff come from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Canadian health authority, and Environment Canada. Three of those are departments that are really under investigation.

So I will tell you up front that while your information is very important in terms of moving forward, our concern with this committee and with the investigator is that they're not really going to get to the responsibility and accountability of what happened, which cost 22 lives.

I had to point that out in the beginning. Now—

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I think it's very important that we keep to the facts here. Mr. Easter has a tendency to play fast and loose with them sometimes.

The facts are that this committee was constructed by the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food to look at food safety in Canada. These witnesses have brought forward very good testimony, and we have a lot to learn from them.

Hon. Wayne Easter: That's right, Mr. Chair, and I'd like to—

Mr. Brian Storseth: It's important that we stick to the facts. This committee was constructed by an all-party committee that voted unanimously in favour of moving forward on this.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I don't think that's a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Just because Mr. Easter doesn't show up after the cameras are off doesn't mean that the rest of the committee isn't moving forward in a non-partisan way.

The Chair: The point of order is so noted.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I'd like to thank you folks for coming. There's no question that food safety is a huge issue.

To the Canadian Horticultural Council, you went through a long list of areas where you're certainly, I think, at the farm gate level, doing everything that can be done in terms of food safety—the HACCP system, CFIA providing inspections, etc. In my province, the biggest cost for a potato producer now is in fact the food inspections.

I have two questions. One, does the Government of Canada have responsibility over food safety in this country? Two, as compared with other countries, the farmers in Canada seem to be paying for the food inspection system to a great extent. It's not so in other countries. Is that not therefore driving some of our producers basically out of business, and we'll have to depend on imported product?

• (1635)

Ms. Anne Fowlie: Well, I think there are clearly costs for producers, and these are incremental. There is no market premium for that; I think it's implicit to the consumer that food be safe regardless of how that happens. Again, there is no market premium, and food safety as a condition of access to the market shouldn't be what will drive some producers out of the industry.

As far as government responsibility is concerned, I certainly think it's been a very positive, appropriate, and expected action by the CFIA, the Government of Canada, to have set up criteria and protocols based on science as to how groups such as ourselves, or the other numerous national associations who have developed food safety programs, go about doing that. So it is based on science. It is credible. The system is there, and they review it and pronounce on it.

As to who should pay, clearly the producer does not get his fair share out of the market and out of the supply chain. For us it's very important that we work with other stakeholders in the supply chain, so there's a reasonable confidence at the producer level that we know that things are being done all along the way. The producer at the farm can have done everything to the best of his ability, and when the truck leaves the yard that's all he knows: it's left the yard and he knows he's done his best. We have to have the confidence that as products move through the chain, everybody else—Chris' group and others—will take responsibility in the next step.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I guess the problem, Anne, that I'm trying to get at here—and maybe we need to make a recommendation on this—is that the primary producer is paying the bill in this country, and it's not so in other countries.

Coming to Mr. Kyte's point on imported food, I believe he said we seem to be able to justify what we spend in plant inspections. Those

inspections are a cost to the companies you represent, but I don't think the same kind of rigidity is found for imported products.

We have a farm industry that's in huge financial difficulty. Part of the cost structure of that industry is food inspection costs by CFIA and others. When those costs are borne by producers, the cheap imported product coming from places where there's cheap labour and less environmental standards, and certainly not the care of the product that we must have in this country, can drive our farmers out of business.

So my question is this: shouldn't the Canadian government be compensating or covering off the food safety inspection costs as other countries do? And, second, shouldn't imported product have to meet exactly the same, or at least the equivalent, standards that Canadian producers have to meet?

I direct this question to Anne and Mr. Kyte.

Ms. Anne Fowlie: Certainly on imported products, that's something that's key to us. We want a level playing field and we want things to be competitive.

Certainly in the communications that the major Canadian retailer I referred to has issued to vendors, they are indicating they need to be on the CHC program and be audited, and/or be in an equivalent program. That's in part why some of these international linkages are so important. We've rebranded our program as CanadaGAP, and there are a number of reasons for that.

In terms of paying for the actual inspection, whether it's the actual inspection or ensuring there are programs and resources in place for the producer to invest in developing and implementing the program, regardless of what it is, it's important that resources be provided for that. We need to see that continued. There have been some, but have they been enough? Is it ever enough? But that needs to continue.

I reference the fact that certainly, in some instances, what we have found.... The potato industry, in particular, Mr. Easter, as I'm sure you are aware, was an early adopter for a number of reasons, including market pressures. In many respects, it is in fact the potato producers in Canada who've been penalized for that, if you will, by virtue of the fact that they could not access program implementation dollars for implementing their food safety programs because the program had either not received the letter of completion from CFIA, and they had to implement prior to that.... And certainly now, with the new Growing Forward plan and the changes in implementation, and the way that's gone out to the provinces, the people who've implemented this already will not be eligible for dollars, and they still need dollars.

• (1640)

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Bellavance, for seven minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Thank you for your testimony.

Mr. Kyte, is Maple Leaf one of your members?

[English]

Mr. Christopher Kyte: Yes, they are.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: I can tell you that, to this day, only one witness has come before this committee and accepted responsibility for the listeriosis crisis, and that was the president of Maple Leaf. Mr. McCain said that it was their fault and that they took the responsibility for it. But he is the only one who has said so.

The minister, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the Public Health Agency have all said that the government has a role to play in food safety, but it is as if they are trying to keep themselves out of trouble. Whatever they say their position is, they certainly were not there when the drama unfolded. They do not want to take any responsibility and they wash their hands of it. At least, that is what emerges from the testimony that we have heard so far.

You have proposed potential solutions that are very interesting. For example, you say that some changes should be made, even though the agency is working relatively well. I must say that, in its report, the agency did make a kind of confession, even though it does not take responsibility for the crisis.

For example, the agency did not set up a control centre to manage the crisis. But a control centre is part of the crisis response plan. The agency also agreed that there were some problems in communication. Cameron Prince told us that they met inspectors who said that there were not enough of them at the site. Dr. Evans told us: "It is clear that collectively we did not meet the expectations of Canadians."

So, that is a confession of sorts. In your potential solutions, you mentioned some changes that should be made, such as in the checks on imported meat. Ms. Fowlie could say the same thing for fruits and vegetables. We could improve the checks on products that come from outside, because you point out the lack of resources for inspections on the border.

[English]

Mr. Christopher Kyte: Thank you.

Where do I start?

Number one, there was a problem. They fixed the problem, and that problem is behind them, but it is now part of that company's mantra how to manage going forward. Yes, they stood up and they took responsibility, but every food processor in the country has to take responsibility for how his plants operate.

The role as I see it for the agency is to set the rules. If you look at the charter of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, it is about trade and commerce. You can't ship tainted meat anywhere. That agency has a responsibility for making sure that anything that goes out of the plants has rules for how it's processed, how you ship it, how you handle the meats or any other product that's manufactured. You can't export anything that does not meet our regulations, and other countries' regulations as well.

So there are definitely a couple of roles here. Number one, the agency has to establish the standards, most of which are international standards. Number two, the companies have to follow or exceed

those standards. And as I mentioned before, the customers are in our plants with fully trained auditors, and their requirements are higher than government standards.

Is there a relationship between the number of inspectors you have and the safety of your products? No, I don't think so. I've not seen it, because, number one, you can't see if meat has bacteria on it or not.

So I would say that the systems are pretty sophisticated. They keep improving. Company practices keep improving. You're using HACCP, you're using ISO, you're using rapid testing, and you're using DNA testing. There's a whole bunch of things in play. So I'm more comfortable today.

Where I feel less comfortable, as I was mentioning earlier, is how we handle food at home. That's where your higher risk is.

Thank you.

• (1645)

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: It is a shared responsibility. With the barbecue season just starting, consumers must be very careful about the way in which they prepare their food.

The crisis happened in August. You say that one of the solutions would be to improve inspections at the border, but, in this particular case, the food was not imported, it was domestic. The bacteria were found in the plant in Toronto. You can tell me that more inspections will not necessarily mean finding more listeria. But having inspections done by people in the plant does not solve the problem either.

What can we learn from this? What does the Canadian Food Inspection Agency have to do to become more effective? I am not sure that having more people in offices pushing paper is the solution either. I would like to know what you think.

[English]

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I agree. You can put another 10,000 people in Ottawa here. That's not going to make a difference. Let's not talk about the individual company. Instead, let's talk about how would I recommend that you improve the plant inspection practices. You would probably be well-served to get a study group of company people and experts and work in a non-political setting on how to get the best decision. How would you improve the system? What should the company do? What are the best practices? You have to ask these things.

I can't go backwards and say what actually happened or didn't happen, but I know from my experiences that when you have an unfortunate incident, you can make it positive by proactively saying what you can do to improve the situation. This hearing is probably one of those stepping stones.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Allen.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): I want to thank all of you for coming.

Mr. Kyte, you referenced the chart as being yours, indicating that the number of recalls has actually declined. I suppose if we look at it in whole terms you can make that statement. But I would suggest that the imported recalls haven't increased or decreased. In 2005-06, there were 21. In 2006-07, there were 33. In 2007-08, it was 32. Statistically, not much has changed. In fact, statisticians would say that's no change. Really, the import recalls have increased, not decreased. The domestic recalls have fluctuated from a high of 46 in 2002-03 to a low of 33 the following year. After that, it bounced back up to 42, then went down to 31, and then to 30, which is really equal.

Mr. Christopher Kyte: Well, you don't see it going up.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: I'm simply looking at the raw numbers, and I don't see an absolute decline. The numbers may indeed be settling, and people might look at them and get into somewhat of a risk aversion pattern. They might say that it's not too bad, that it's an acceptable risk. But if you talk to the families of the 22 people who died last year, this wouldn't be an acceptable risk. To see this downward pattern in what mathematicians call an "absolute zero" context is not wholly accurate.

One of the other things you talked about has always interested me, and it's not the first time we've heard it. This has to do with industry standards. We all set the bar to different places. One thing for sure is that the government standard is the floor. I'm not upset by this perspective. The industry standards are higher. They're not climbing up to the floor—they're above the floor. This prompts the question: why is the government standard so much lower than industry's? If the industry is the leader, and food safety is the responsibility of the industry, why doesn't the government catch up to your standards?

• (1650)

Mr. Christopher Kyte: Look, I'm not an expert, but I'll give you some points.

Number one, we're not an island. If you look at the United States and all these other trading partners, we have no lessons to learn from them either. I noticed in the testimony I went through last night that people were pointing at Europe and saying, "Well, they're so much better than the rest of us." Well, I would suggest not. It's our name on the packages, so you have to make darn sure that your products are safe, that they're the right price, that they're wholesome—all those other consumer expectations. Our customers are also demanding that. They're becoming more sophisticated as well. So that's really the level you have to—

Mr. Malcolm Allen: I get that. Not to interrupt you, but I am. I get that. The systems that you're based on are old manufacturing systems, whether it be TQM, TQS, SPC—they all go back 25 years, when I was in the auto sector. The food system has simply taken those, incorporated them, and built on them. Those systems, sir, meant that when you were on the floor and you went above it, the floor moved up. What I'm hearing from the folks who come here... the industry is saying, "We're above the floor, but we don't want the floor to come up."

What I'm suggesting is that the government should be saying, if that is indeed the enhanced process—because what you're building into your systems is this continuous improvement, which actually comes out of the Toyota manufacturing system—if that's indeed

what you're doing, that system says that when that continuous improvement gets you to here, the floor comes to there. Now you work from there, and when you continue to improve and get to there, the floor comes to here. What I keep hearing over and over again in testimony is that the government's floor is down here and we're up here, and I'm not suggesting it's your responsibility, sir, to drag that floor back up.

But what I hear from the industry and from the horticultural society, especially, because we had one of your colleagues here before, Ms. Fowlie, who explained HACCP and what the folks were doing with OFFS...great systems, great initiatives, an industry that's taking a leadership role and is getting out and looking at enhancing those systems.

What I keep looking for someone to tell me, and I believe it's unfair to actually ask you this, is, why is the CFIA not involved in an improvement process that you're leading and they're lagging in? Why aren't they coming up to the same standard, so that indeed as you lead us again they will lag behind you and pull themselves back up?

I don't think you can necessarily give me the answer, because that was more of a comment than a statement.

To you, Ms. Fowlie, around the system you have—I read your backgrounder off your website—you use a group to audit. It's a general question, because I may have read by it and just didn't see it. The CFIA used to have an auditor's group that audited the auditors. What I didn't see in this was that this is a group outside of CFIA that you've hired to do audits. Is there a mechanism where someone actually audits that group on a periodic basis?

Ms. Anne Fowlie: I can't give you the complete details on that right here and now, but I will follow up with you.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: I appreciate that.

Ms. Anne Fowlie: The group we went with, QMI-SAI Global, was the group that was internationally accredited to the existing standards, whether it's ISO.... Again, I don't know the proper terminology, but that is in part why we went with that group, because they were the one group that did have those international credentials.

• (1655)

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Just to clarify, I'm not suggesting that somehow they're not qualified. What I'm simply saying is when you have an audit process, there usually is this external audit that comes in on a very infrequent basis and just simply checks that the standards are being met. I just didn't know if I'd read past it. But I appreciate the response that you will get that for us. Thank you.

Thanks for your indulgence, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Allen.

Mr. Anderson, for seven minutes.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just before I begin here, I'd like to respond to what Mr. Bellavance and maybe Mr. Allen were implying, in that there's something in a major way that's wrong with our food safety system that's putting people in a position—and it's barbecue season—where somehow they're going to be at major risk. I guess I'm going home to barbecue when I can. I'm going to barbecue chicken. I'm going to barbecue pork and beef and fish, and I'm going to be comfortable with doing that. The issue isn't that people are normally at risk. I think that's what you're saying today. The issue that we're really studying here is that we're trying to minimize a risk that our witnesses have told us can never be zero. That's really what we're going through here with this committee and with what the government is trying to do in its improvements as well.

I wanted to just pick up on one thing you said, Mr. Kyte. You talked about wanting to apply these standards across some other provincial plants and those kinds of things. We've talked about this a couple of times at committee. Are you suggesting we should have one standard across the country for provincial, for smaller plants, and for federal plants? If you are, I'd like your input on how we keep some of the smaller plants still functioning, because they often produce into a very small market. If there's an issue with their products, it's very quickly found, quickly controlled. It's not the same as some of the national companies. We've talked about that a couple of times with witnesses, but I'd like to know what your thoughts are on that.

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I'd make a couple of points. One actually answers your point, and that is that regulations do migrate up. Years ago HACCP wasn't heard of and now HACCP is the standard. The critical control points keep getting improved, and then the policies, the procedures, the regulations, and the work manuals all move up. So they do; it's just like a glacier, though.

I don't know how you do the provincial plants. I know it's a problem. And the reason I say that is that of the 5,000 plants, 50% of them employ fewer than four people. On the other hand, if somebody is sick, they don't care if they're sick in a 1,000-employee plant or a four-person plant. I think it's incumbent on us in the provincial governments to have the national standard and apply it, certainly in terms of HACCP and some of those kinds of things. But beyond that, I don't know how you're going to do it. There are two standards, and the provincial governments have to get more active and bring those provincial standards up. It's their responsibility too; it's a shared responsibility.

Mr. David Anderson: I don't know if I'm misinterpreting what you said, but maybe you're suggesting that the important part is to deal with the supply chain, and then at the level of production the provinces can regulate as they feel is best. Is that what you're suggesting?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: Yes.

Mr. David Anderson: Ms. Fowlie, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions. If I cut you off here it's because I have limited time. I wanted to talk about some of the international issues that you spoke about.

Are you running into any problems, particularly with the U.S., that are similar to the COOL situation that the beef producers are feeling—country-of-origin labelling that's causing our producers to

have problems accessing production facilities in the United States? Has that been an issue at all for your folks?

Ms. Anne Fowlie: With respect to country-of-origin labelling, no, because the trade and commerce piece is under CFIA and the CAP Act—prescribed labelling, grade standards, and those types of things. So for fresh products that has not been an issue for us. It tends to be more in the value-added pieces.

Mr. David Anderson: Are the bilateral negotiations making a difference to countries that we've done bilaterals with? Has that made a difference to your horticultural interests?

Ms. Anne Fowlie: Yes, of course. We follow closely.

Mr. David Anderson: So that's been a positive thing.

You talked about the recognition of other countries' programs and their recognizing ours. Where is that at? How much of that coordination do we have? How much of that acceptance do we have and do we give?

Ms. Anne Fowlie: In terms of our food safety program and where we're going with benchmarking against GlobalGAP and the GFSI, the global food safety initiative, what we have now in Canada is that some of our apple producers—I'll speak about them because I know firsthand, in Ontario and B.C. in particular—are certified to GlobalGAP for export reasons. One of our objectives from the outset had been to find ways to ensure that the producer did not have to participate in the proliferation of audits and additional costs and so forth. Once that benchmarking is complete, then the one audit will suffice.

• (1700)

Mr. David Anderson: You talked about participation being market-driven. Does that mean it's still voluntary, or does it mean that as the big companies are requiring it, then more and more producers are basically obligated if they want to participate and be part of it? I think you said you had 300 producers that are certified. Is that a high enough number, or does that need to go up?

Ms. Anne Fowlie: It's going to increase. I don't want to get into the semantics of terminology, but actually that number is far greater. When we look at the number of potato producers in Canada who are supplying the processors, McCain Foods in particular, they've had it in their acceptance criteria in their contracts now for a number of years that producers must be on the CHC program and must be third-party reviewed. This year they've moved to the type of audit that we're involved in. But they were doing their own audits, so they've had means to verify what was being done.

It is, in fact, higher if you want to look at it in that context.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay.

Tricia, I wanted to ask a couple questions about two pilot programs you mentioned that you had run. The second one was the control of—I didn't get the full title—microorganisms on the meat handling facilities. Did you come with any recommendations that might be apropos to the discussion we're having here and the incidents from last summer?

Ms. Tricia Meaud: The full name of the project was the control of biofilm microorganisms on surfaces associated with meat processing facilities. I'm not a microbiologist, so I'll give you the layman's explanation. Biofilms are groups of bacteria that have gone together and are acting as one, as a film. This project was to test those.

Yes, the proponent did come up with six recommendations, which I actually have here today but didn't provide to the clerk because I wasn't sure if I'd be speaking to them or not. I can provide that, and it is in both languages as well. The gist of their recommendations is that—as Mr. Allen said about raising the bar—perhaps in future policy decisions biofilms would be one area to look at.

I can provide you with a copy of the recommendations. That would probably be easiest.

Mr. David Anderson: Am I just about out of time?

The Chair: Your time has expired, Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Easter, you have five minutes.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kyte, I asked you a question earlier, but you didn't get a chance to answer it. It was about how serious the country is about doing inspections on imports versus domestic product, and the fact that—I certainly believe—that product should have to meet the same standards as does Canadian product, not only on the safety side but also on the production side.

The second question I had asked you is this. You mentioned pre-market label review, and you seemed to be pretty emphatic about that. So perhaps you could just explain that a little further and tell this committee what you might recommend in that regard. Then we could certainly consider it.

Mr. Christopher Kyte: The issue of mislabelled imports has been a real problem for the industry for many years. It dates back to the seventies. It predates me. It kills jobs.

I remember a few years ago there was a U.S. company shipping in french fries that didn't meet Canadian standards, and they were being sold in Toronto. It was costing the industry \$57,000 a week until we could finally get those things off the shelves. And that took us about two months. So that gives you a sense of the financial dynamic of mislabelled imports. They can come up. They can be dumped.

If they have a price war in the United States, they'll divert their product into the Canadian marketplace. By the time we get it off the store shelves, we've lost a lot of money. So the financial side puts a stress on companies, especially the smaller companies. And we don't need to lose any more companies. We've lost 24 sizable processing plants and 9,000 employees in the last two years. We don't want to see more of that happening.

The second point is that if somebody gets sick, do they care if it's from an American product or a Canadian product? Well, on the Canadian product side, you're doing what you can—your due diligence. You're trying to eliminate the risk. But we're not trying to eliminate the risk on imports. And that's a problem.

If you look at the size, the number, and the frequency of food-borne illnesses caused by American producers—from spinach,

lettuce, red peppers, peanut butter—the numbers are huge. If we think we have a problem in Canada, take a look elsewhere.

Did I answer your question?

• (1705)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Is that for the pre-market labels as well?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: On the pre-market label, it's a really deficient.... In the last cost-recovery sessions, which would have been in the early nineties, the meat industry wanted the pre-market review program, which was tied to import controls. In this country, every time you want to market a product that contains meat, you send the label to the CFIA, and they review that label to make sure it doesn't have allergens, that it meets the Canadian regulations, that it has the right weight, that it comes from a registered plant—all of those kinds of safeguards—and then they allow it. So that's for both domestic and imported products.

The agency allowed the service to deteriorate somewhat, so there was a delay for companies. Service turnaround time was up to eight weeks, and now it's back to two and a half weeks. That's great for the agency.

Unfortunately, the agency, in its strategic review, has to get rid of this import control program. This is a really good, cost-effective enforcement program. No other category has it. If you look at some categories, such as baked goods, juices, drinks, and a whole bunch of those categories, the number of mislabelled products is huge. I understand that even the dairy farmers were here talking to Robert de Valk the other day about the problems they're having in the dairy industry and how the labels are out of compliance.

Hon. Wayne Easter: So you're strongly suggesting that this remain.

Mr. Christopher Kyte: It should remain for meat, and it should be added to for other categories. Meat is the biggest industry—13 employees.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Easter.

We'll now move to Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you for coming.

Can I just follow up—so that I clearly understand—on what Mr. Easter was talking about? In terms of the mislabelling, misinformative labelling, is that in terms of the pre-labelling? Are you talking about the same thing, that to help, as a recommendation, you fix one with the other? We're talking about two things here, from my understanding.

Mr. Christopher Kyte: No, the pre-market label review is tied to 100% border control for meat-containing products.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Okay.

Mr. Christopher Kyte: It is also applied domestically. You don't send your inspectors into foreign plants. This is your way of making sure the playing field is level.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Are there some agreements—and we were told there were—in other countries, and particularly in the United States, so that when they are moving a product to, say, this country, the inspectors there understand what the standards are for this country? We would have the same in our plants if there is product going to another country, such as the United States, for example, that when they were producing that product, they would know what the standards are so they meet them. Is that a true statement?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: Not quite. If we want to ship a meat-containing product into the United States, we have to get the label approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. So they have a pre-market review system. What's more, they're expanding that pre-market review system to include other product categories, because they're kind of concerned about what's coming in from China.

We have not found that the U.S. regulators nor the U.S. industry have the same sensitivity to Canadian regulations as we have when we ship south.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Are you recommending then—just for the pre-market labelling—that we would actually pick up on those standards and implement them here? The procedure?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: Well, I think the procedures could be made more efficient, but essentially right now the Canadian system and the American system are similar. What we're going to do is create a North American imbalance.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Can I go to another area? When we're talking about food safety, it was listeria that was the issue, but the bigger part of this, or just as important a part, is that we don't have a recurrence. Yet we understand you said more inspectors don't necessarily make safer food.

What is it that inspectors need to be trained in that will actually make our food system safer? Is it the training they have? With listeria, you could stand on the line and watch all you want—you can't taste it, you can't see it, you can't smell it; it's basically an invisible killer. But it's my understanding also that listeria is something that is out there in our environment. So when you say that, what do you mean in terms of what our inspectors need to do?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I think what you've got right now is the testing protocols that have been improved with the listeria policy. Many of my members have done test and hold for years. You've got HACCP. So what you're doing is making sure the critical control points are monitored because you can't, with any degree of success, do end-product testing. You could test every product and still never get it, whereas if you make sure you do it right the first time, then you have a greater degree of assurance that you're putting a finished product out.

I'm not an in-plant inspection expert, so I can't say much more than that. I don't know the degree of training they do get now. I would have to assume it's effective.

Mr. Bev Shipley: One of the things you talked about is how we improve. How do we improve our systems? I'm interested in your comments because I think they have a lot of value. You're talking about moving away from the political influence of moving ahead and actually getting industry...there will always be agency participation. Would you suggest that might be a recommendation you would propose?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I would, and you will have Jim Laws speaking next. He's with the Canadian Meat Council and he's much closer to the plant floor. I know he and his colleagues in some of the meat-related associations have done some serious work to improve safety in plants, and that's something they might take up in terms of doing study groups and plant practice workshops and things.

● (1710)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kyte, I would like some clarification on a couple of things you said in your opening remarks. I forget the exact numbers, but you indicated that only 2,300 of some number of processing plants—I think that was the term you used—in Canada are actually federally inspected.

I presume some of those that aren't are some of our provincially inspected plants. To be clear where you're going with this, if you are implying that provincially inspected meat plants, slaughter plants, aren't up to par, I guess I've probably got a bit of an issue with that, first of all as a farmer and secondly as a politician.

Are you saying basically that for any meat-killing plant in Canada—beef, pork, whatever—if it is not federally inspected, there is a food safety issue there?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: No, not at all. I'm saying that the listeria policy applies only to the 2,300, not to the 5,000. In a perfect world, you'd apply it to the 5,000. That's not how you do that.

The Chair: In our regular agriculture committee we're conducting a competitiveness study of all aspects of food delivery, including slaughter, grocery stores, or whatever. Grocery stores here in Ontario, and I think mostly across the country, have a policy that none of their stores, even the independent ones, are allowed to sell provincially inspected beef or pork, because they buy through their wholesale partners. Do you think they have any justification for that from a food safety point of view?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I haven't talked about that kind of issue for many years. However, they know what they're getting from a federally inspected plant. They're familiar with the rules and so are their auditors. This makes for some simplicity in auditing and purchasing.

● (1715)

The Chair: Can you explain why they wouldn't also understand what the provincial rules were?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I couldn't tell you.

The Chair: But you're from the processing industry, and I assume that you don't represent only federally inspected processors.

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I represent them.

The Chair: Is there any justification for grocery stores to demand that only federally inspected food be allowed in their grocery stores? I'm asking you for your professional opinion.

Mr. Christopher Kyte: There's a cachet attached to selling it as federally inspected meat. There's a standard—that's their policy.

The Chair: You don't want to comment on it. Okay, that's fair enough.

Mr. Bellavance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you.

Mr. Kyte, you have just told us that you are not an expert in food inspection. Neither am I. But scientists have also told us that having more inspectors in every plant will not necessarily result in any bacteria being found. You cannot smell bacteria, nor see them. Unless the facilities are so unsanitary that you decide to shut down the line, I understand that a visual inspection...

People want to have confidence in their food inspection system. I do not doubt the industry's capacity to conduct inspections. The industry does not want to lose its reputation, or have people become ill, or worse, have people die as a result of what can happen in a plant. With its taxes, the public wants to feel sure that independent inspections are being done, by the government in this case, and that there are more inspectors on the plant floor to take samples.

You are not an expert, but you think that having more inspectors will not necessarily solve the problem. But bacteria can be found if samples are taken and if the cleanliness of equipment is checked. Those are the things that can be improved so that people can have more confidence in their food safety system.

Do you agree?

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I don't think the number of inspectors would make any difference. I think the trend towards HACCP and things like that encourages monitoring, making sure the companies are doing what they're supposed to be doing. They're supposed to be doing the testing. If it's product testing that's been scientifically proven to be something you should do, then that's part of your protocol. The listeria policy says you have to do this, this, and this, and then if that happens, you have to do this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: How can we be sure of that if there is no one providing independent oversight? That is my question.

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher Kyte: There are people auditing you to make sure you're doing what you're supposed to do. You can't go much beyond that. Take orange juice adulteration, which is entirely different but also the same. If you put an inspector in a plant all the time, you still can't detect orange juice adulteration—adding sugar instead of orange juice solids. You could only find that out by hiring a snitch inside the plant. So I might be wrong, but I don't see the relationship between the number of auditors or inspectors and the outcome.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Anderson.

• (1720)

Mr. David Anderson: This question is probably for Mr. Kyte.

Do you anticipate more recalls because of the changes that were made by the government on April 1 in some of the listeria testing, or do you see the recall system working separately from those changes?

Mr. Christopher Kyte: I don't see a relationship between recalls and what you establish as new procedures once everybody is accommodated and puts them in practice in their plants.

The Chair: Thank you very much to our witnesses.

We've certainly had a full round and a little more. I'd like to thank you for coming here today. I think your input to this review on food safety is very important.

We're going to break briefly and then come back to the table. We have votes tonight and will have to leave for a few minutes to vote.

I'll ask our next witnesses from the Canadian Meat Council, Olymel, and the Ontario Independent Meat Processors, and the Beef Information Centre to take the table as soon as possible and we'll get going.

Thanks again to our witnesses.

- _____ (Pause) _____
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- (1725)

The Chair: Mr. Bellavance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Chair, can we have a schedule of the witnesses coming up? We were sent a schedule of dates and witnesses on April 16. But, given the time we have to do this committee work, I would like to know if all the witnesses are available in the time slots we have. We can have Monday from 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. and Wednesday from 4:00 p.m. to 10 p.m. We do not have a lot of time left, but we have to make sure that all the witnesses are available for all our time slots.

I have been told that Option consommateurs is ready to come to the committee at any time. There have been times when we have had few witnesses because we were told that they were not available.

I want to remind the committee that I asked for Tony Clement, the former Minister of Health, to come to testify. I do not see his name. I hope that he will be on the list.

I would like an updated schedule to see if all the witnesses are able to be on it.

[*English*]

The Chair: I don't have a copy of it in front of me, but we can soon supply it.

As far as your reference to how some witnesses weren't available, as you know, on Monday night we tried to get a bunch, but because of the H1N1 it was very difficult. In fact it ended up being impossible to get witnesses for that night, so we weren't able to hold that. We're trying to get every witness on the list here.

You mentioned going until 10 on Monday night. It was part of the instructions given to us by the committee that if we had to we'd go from 4 until 10, and we're going there. We can certainly get an updated calendar. I guess there isn't any reason why it can't be sent out in the next day or two.

To our witnesses, thank you very much for being here. Bells will start to go off in a few minutes, but don't be alarmed. We will have to depart to vote and we'll be back here as soon as possible.

Please keep opening remarks for each organization to 10 minutes or less. That will allow more time for questioning.

First from the Canadian Meat Council, we have Mr. Jim Laws.

Mr. James M. Laws (Executive Director, Canadian Meat Council): Good evening, and thank you for inviting us to speak to you today on food safety in the meat sector. My name is Jim Laws and I'm the executive director of the Canadian Meat Council in Ottawa. With me today is Martin Michaud, vice-president of technical services at Olymel, one of Canada's largest processors of pork and pork products, headquartered in St-Hyacinthe, Quebec.

Our sector is the largest of the food processing industries, employing some 67,000 people, with gross sales of over \$20.3 billion. We have 43 regular members who operate 134 federally registered establishments across Canada. We also have 74 associate supplier members who provide equipment, rendering, storage, ingredients, packaging materials, and services such as laboratory testing for the regular members. Altogether there are some 772 registered federal establishments that slaughter, process, render, debone, package, can, or offer storage for meat and are inspected by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Every day in Canada, over 100 million meals are eaten. A significant number of those meals contain meat eaten in Canada each and every day. Major illnesses and deaths due to meat are rare events in Canada. The number of meat recalls in proportion to the volume of Canada's total meat production is quite small. Most meat recalls are issued voluntarily by meat processors as a precautionary measure. Very few meat recalls in Canada are a direct result of illness. Many Canadians who travel abroad to countries around the world know that they have to be very careful about what they eat. Getting sick from something that we have eaten here in Canada is something we rarely worry about.

Nevertheless, Canada's meat sector has been challenged with several major food safety events over the past few years. Canada's meat industry takes full responsibility for the safety of the meat it produces. Maple Leaf Foods did the right thing. They stepped up and accepted full responsibility for the products from their Bartor Road facility.

We need to get on with this subcommittee's work and the work of the listeria investigation so that all the lessons learned can be shared with the entire industry so that this type of outbreak does not happen again. Yes, we still have work to do.

We actively participated in the CFIA consultations on the new listeria control measures that came into effect on April 1, 2009. We welcome those new measures; however, we still have many questions about the policy. We believe the policy should be amended to set the rate of testing based on the risk of the product produced.

For instance, dried and salted deli meats, such as salami and pepperoni, generally do not support the growth of listeria. Others with higher moisture, like deli hams, do. We also believe that the rate of testing should reflect the investment in brand-new state-of-the-art buildings and equipment, combined with the company's proven track record of excellent lab results. In addition, we have asked the CFIA to let industry have access to the entire rapid assay tests for listeria that appear in Health Canada's *The Compendium of Analytical Methods* and those that are permitted in the United States.

Over the years, meat processors have been continually improving their food safety systems. Millions of dollars have been invested by companies in upgrading their equipment and reformulating their products to include newly approved antimicrobials such as the new high-pressure pasteurization technology and the addition of sodium diacetate. Hundreds of thousands of dollars on additional listeria testing and countless more hours by sanitation management and quality control personnel have been invested. Meat processing facilities employ highly professional food science and microbiology experts to manage their food safety programs, and many firms have Ph.D.s on staff.

Canada's meat industry is already the most regulated sector of the food industry. In addition to the requirements applicable to meat and food under the Food and Drugs Act and regulations and the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act, we must comply with Canada's Meat Inspection Act and regulations and the highly prescriptive and comprehensive manual of procedures.

When we print out all the acts and regulations, there are over 1,500 pages of regulations that we are dealing with. This is the Meat Inspection Act, and then we pull out the manual of procedures. As you can see, it is a very large stack of paper that Canada's meat industry is faced with.

• (1730)

Complete sectors of our grocery supplies, such as bakery goods, cereals, and spices, are rarely inspected and do not have all the additional manuals of procedures that we are faced with in the meat and poultry sector.

Despite the recent events in the meat industry, we believe that our food safety system is not broken. As CFIA correctly points out on their website, the safety of food products produced in Canada is ultimately the responsibility of the food industry. Food inspection programs administered by the CFIA confirmed that establishments have taken the appropriate steps to produce safe food products. In the past, food manufacturers relied almost entirely on end-product testing to determine the safety of their products. Now industry representatives and government together have developed scientifically sound principles, including the HACCP system, to control production. Hazard analysis critical control point, as you all heard before, was conceived in the 1960s when the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration asked Pillsbury to design and manufacture our first foods for space flights.

Our HACCP is a standardized, internationally recognized approach to food safety. Under HACCP, manufacturers identify stages and production processes at which problems are most likely to occur and they take actions to prevent them. After last year's listeriosis outbreak, the Canadian Meat Council immediately formed a listeria working group as a joint effort with other industry associations and their members from the Canadian meat and poultry industry. Our objective is to develop and promote the adoption of best practices for the control of listeria, to advocate for the approval of listeria-controlled interventions, to assist the regulators in developing sound listeria control regulations, and, above all else, to encourage complete sharing of information on food safety between competing processors of ready-to-eat meats.

In addition, we will, of course, continue to deliver regular educational seminars and technical symposia for our members.

I'll pass it on to my colleague, Martin Michaud, who will describe our eight recommendations.

• (1735)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Michaud (Vice-President, Technical Services, Olymel): Good evening.

The recommendations of the Canadian Meat Council, that Olymel is of course part of, are eight in number. The first recommendation deals with antimicrobial interventions. In our opinion, the industry in Canadian should have access to the same antimicrobials and interventions that our American counterparts have.

Health Canada approved the use of sodium diacetate in combination with sodium or potassium lactate in ready-to-eat meats in September 2008. Schneider Foods had officially requested permission to use this antimicrobial six years prior to that, in September of 2002. According to the American Meat Institute, since this antimicrobial has been widely in use, there have been no recalls of ready-to-eat meats due to listeria-related illness in the USA for the past five years.

Our second recommendation is to create a single food safety authority for Canada and the United States. In our opinion, Canada should work with the United States to develop a single authority with the responsibility of overseeing food safety. The Europeans have done it; Australia and New Zealand have done it. Not only that—the Europeans have developed a common economic union that allows

for free movement of goods between a number of countries without the need for border inspections. The new Obama administration has announced that it is reviewing the American food safety system after the salmonella in peanut butter incident. Now is the time to act.

Our third recommendation is that Canada should create a single meat national inspection standard based on outcomes and guidelines, rather than on normative standards and criteria. We believe that all provincial meat inspection standards should meet the federal meat inspection standard. Canadians should expect that all the meat they consume meets the same rigorous standards regardless of where they live and shop. Canada's federally registered meat processors are inspected regularly with standards that meet both high domestic and international requirements.

Provincial meat inspection standards do not meet international or national Canadian requirements and such plants can only sell products in the province in which they operate. Some provinces, like Ontario, have recently introduced new, stronger meat inspection regulations while others still have meat processors that are rarely, if ever, inspected.

Here is our fourth recommendation. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency should be exempt from Treasury Board guidelines on the common look and feel of the federal website so they can get information up on a timely basis. The information is either actually part of the regulations we have to use every day, or refers to them. The Manual of Procedures is constantly being updated, but those updates are often too slow to get onto the website and into the system. For instance, when the new Compliance Verification System was imposed on the industry on April 1, 2008, we had to wait until December of 2008 for chapter 18 of the Manual of Procedures to be finally published on the website and available to the industry.

Even today, there are many sections of the Manual of Procedures that state: "This chapter is currently under review. For more information on its availability, please contact..." This even includes the entire chapter 19: Poultry Inspection Programs. The industry needs to have access to all sections of the Manual of Procedures because it is the basic tool with which we make changes to and inspections of our plants while they are in operation. When a chapter is under review, the current rules should be posted until new ones are made. Even the Government of Canada website on lawmaking states:

A fundamental principle of law is that everyone is presumed to know the law; this principle cannot be applied or be effective unless it is supported by a system that enables those affected by a law to have reasonable access to it.

Our fifth recommendation is that the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency be the voices during crisis events. The Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency should be the official voices that regularly update Canadians during a food safety outbreak. During the listeriosis outbreak last summer, what our industry really needed was a voice and a face that Canadians could rely on as we had during the BSE crisis and the SARS crisis.

• (1740)

What we really needed was a voice to regularly update Canadians on the listeriosis outbreak and on the new rules that were being put in place.

Our sixth recommendation is to invest in better training for inspectors. We believe that CFIA inspectors need to have better and more regular and consistent training. It was evident to us after the new control policy was implemented on April 1, 2009, that this was not always the case. In fact, we met technical teams and teams of inspectors who were having difficulty with the new standards and the new inspection system and with the changes that had been made. Veterinarians are trained in animal physiology and surgery, but they have no training in food science or quality control. That is a problem.

Our seventh recommendation is to make food safety expenses eligible for the Agri-flexibility program. We should put the funding of new food safety technologies on the list of the new program's eligibility criteria. We feel that this is essential.

Our last recommendation is to educate consumers. Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency should continue to educate retailers and consumers on safe handling, storage and preparation practices. A proactive and concerned federal government should target consumer education collaboratively between several ministries. Special attention should be paid to high-risk groups such as the elderly, the immunocompromised, and pregnant women.

Thank you for allowing us to be a part of this committee's work.

Thank you on behalf of Olymel.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. We have about a minute and a half to two minutes to get to the chamber and vote. We will be back very soon.

We will recess for a few minutes.

• _____ (Pause) _____

•

• (1825)

The Chair: We'll call the meeting back to order.

We now move to the Ontario Independent Meat Processors, and Ms. Laurie Nicol.

Thank you very much. Go ahead for 10 minutes or less, please.

Ms. Laurie Nicol (Executive Director, Ontario Independent Meat Processors): Thank you, and I guess it's now good evening.

Thank you for inviting me to make this presentation before the food safety committee. My name is Laurie Nicol. I'm the executive director of the Ontario Independent Meat Processors Association.

Our organization has been representing meat and poultry processors, retailers, and wholesalers operating in Ontario for over 30 years. We currently represent 180 members. They are family owned and operated businesses across Ontario that are both federally and provincially regulated. Many of these businesses are located in the ridings of members I've noticed around the table.

Our members are primarily inspected by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, or OMAFRA, under Ontario meat regulation 31/05 of the Food Safety and Quality Act. I should also mention that these facilities are also subject to the Food and Drugs Act of Canada.

Our organization is a strong supporter of Ontario's provincial food safety regulations, because this makes sense for many of our members who target domestic, in-province business only.

Ontario is fortunate to have a very diversified livestock production industry. Ontario has the highest number of meat processors, both abattoirs and further processors, in all of Canada. In a study conducted for the OIMP in 2008, it was forecast that Ontario's provincial meat and poultry industry represent \$2.2 billion in sales.

Currently, OMAFRA licenses 154 provincial abattoirs and 418 free-standing meat plants. A free-standing meat plant is a business that produces ready-to-eat products through cooking, curing, and fermenting, or one that is involved in low-risk activities, such as grinding, boning, and packaging, with wholesale distribution.

Food safety is the number one priority. It's hard to believe that in Canada today we still have provinces that have not implemented mandatory meat inspection programs, and that food animals are slaughtered for human consumption without inspection.

Our Canadian government has a responsibility for food safety oversight, whether it be for meat, fruits and vegetables, or baked items.

Food items from countries with lower standards continue to enter Canada's marketplace, while Ontario's provincially licensed, highly regulated plants are restricted to trade within the province. On the other side, our Canadian government has imposed higher standards regarding SRM regulations, and the survival of our provincial abattoirs that are processing Ontario's beef continues to be threatened by the high cost of complying with these regulations.

Regulations do not ensure food safety, yet they provide the protocols under which we produce safe food products. Food safety is a shared responsibility, and it begins with everyone understanding their role in ensuring that the products we grow, process, purchase, cook, and ultimately eat are handled properly throughout.

Ontario has the strongest recognized provincial meat inspection program in all of Canada. Our plants are not operating at a lesser food safety standard than large multinational federal facilities, as indicated in recent public statements.

Most of Ontario's provincially licensed establishments are family-run businesses that possess unique characteristics not found in plants designed for large-volume production and export markets. These smaller businesses operate at a more personal level. Generally, the owners can be found on the plant floor controlling activity. The family structure leads to more cohesive management and better control of day-to-day production issues, quality, and food safety outcomes. Outcome-based goals and objectives are common in our industry, and food safety is no exception.

The commitment to food safety in Ontario meat plants has continued to evolve and strengthen over the past four decades. Meat inspection in Ontario first began in 1965 for the provincial plants with red meat, and by 1969, inspection was mandatory in abattoirs throughout Ontario. In 1982 the regulation was expanded to include white meat. These regulations were the first step in a series of initiatives that have brought Ontario to a leadership role in food safety in the provincial meat industry.

In 1991 legislation was passed that required that all animals slaughtered and offered for sale must be inspected.

In 1992 our organization and OMAFRA developed a meat industry training course to educate operators on the requirements under the regulation. This was also used as training material for provincial meat inspectors.

In 2000 there was a first attempt at establishing a national standard for the meat industry. Both the Ontario government and our organization participated in the working group to develop a national meat and poultry code.

In 2001 Ontario's Food Safety and Quality Act was enacted. It formed the framework for the development of the enhanced meat regulation that is currently in existence.

● (1830)

In 2003 our organization co-authored a food handler training course that became the recognized standard for mandatory food handler training in provincially licensed meat plants.

Due to the fact that the CFIA could not provide HACCP certification for non-federally registered meat plants, Ontario developed the HACCP advantage program based on Codex Alimentarius standards, which was launched in 2004.

In 2004 a very public review of Ontario's meat inspection program was conducted by Justice Haines. Many of the recommendations were already under development, as Ontario has continually updated its regulatory standards.

In 2005 the Ontario meat regulation 31/05 was introduced and formed the basis of solid prerequisite programs, which are commonly referred to under the HACCP programs. These standards included requirements for written programs, record keeping, temperature control, cleaning and sanitizing standards, and personal practices, which lay the groundwork for further development of

enhanced food safety programs. To ensure the effectiveness of Ontario's meat regulation, our provincial government has licensing requirements, with compliance and enforcement tools; veterinarian-based inspection in abattoirs; a further processing inspection program; an external independent audit program; water sampling programs; microbial sampling; baseline studies; and an inspection legend that readily identifies Ontario inspected meat products.

In 2005 CFIA initiated a meat inspection system review, a second attempt to integrate a national standard with provincial government participation. This led to the development of the draft Canadian meat hygiene standard, with anticipated stakeholder consultations to take place in the summer of 2007, but which came to a halt in 2008.

Despite all the improvements and investments that Ontario—both government and industry—has made to strengthen its provincial meat inspection program and food safety systems, Ontario continues to battle market access limitation from the Ontario retailers and the food service community, and we're not able to recognize any interprovincial opportunities.

Now, for some of our recommendations, we do support and need a standardized domestic food safety program across Canada based on food safety outcomes.

We respectfully request that the federal government recognize, through the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, that Ontario meat regulation 31/05 meets the federal meat regulation in the food safety standards and that Ontario's HACCP advantage program be recognized as equivalent.

Lastly, food safety is a permanent and critical part of the culture in our meat processing businesses. We need more ongoing training for inspectors and industry to ensure delivery of uniform programs at a national level, and we need to do a better job at educating consumers about their role in food safety.

I thank you for the opportunity, and I would welcome any questions afterwards.

● (1835)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to the Beef Information Centre. We have Ms. Lisa Mina and Marin Pavlic.

Ms. Lisa Mina (Executive Director, Consumer Marketing, Beef Information Centre): We would like to begin by thanking you for inviting us to appear today to provide the Beef Information Centre's view on food safety in Canada. I'm the executive director of consumer marketing, and Marin Pavlic is BIC's food safety program manager.

We have filed an English copy with the committee clerk.

The Beef Information Centre, established in 1973, is the beef market development division of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. Our mission is to maximize demand for Canadian beef and to optimize the value of Canadian beef products in Canada and the United States. To achieve its mission, BIC focuses on several market drivers, including product perception, a Canadian beef advantage, and food safety. We are a national organization, representing approximately 86,000 beef producers in Canada.

BIC's commitment to food safety education, for the consumer and throughout the supply chain, is extensive, proactive, and long-standing. We keep a careful eye on consumer attitudes and behaviours and work across the supply chain with processors, retailers, and food service operators. Key influencers such as media and health professionals are also our stakeholders. Where CCA focuses on cattle production and trade issues, the BIC focuses on beef from the time it leaves the processing plant to the time it reaches the consumer.

The Canadian public is a key stakeholder in our food safety education efforts. We are a founding member of the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education. Since January 2008, we have reached over 30,000 Canadians with food safety education resources, including the "Food Safety at Home" booklet, which provides information on how to reduce the risk of food-borne illness.

For several years, we have played a leadership role in promoting the use of thermometers to ensure proper cooking temperatures, which is a pillar of safe food handling. In 2008, BIC had over 50,000 web visits per month, all of which resulted in access to food safety information.

To support supply chain partners, BIC provides a range of food safety education resources. For example, at retail, the *Good Retail Practices Meat Manual* offers meat operational processes and programs that drive meat quality and safety. The *Developing Food Safety Systems* manual provides information on implementing a HACCP-based food safety program. Most important, the Canadian food safety system itself, from gate to plate, is a critical pillar of the Canadian beef advantage.

Currently, for our discussion on food safety in Canada, we would like to take this opportunity to make four recommendations around food safety. The first recommendation is to encourage the Canadian government to play a more pronounced role in public education of Canada's food safety systems and consumer safe food handling. The 2007 CFIA report titled, "Canadians' Perception of the Safety of Canada's Food Supply" indicates that Canadians generally have confidence in the safety of the food supply; however, they demonstrate low awareness of what regulations exist, how they are complied with, and who is responsible for their enforcement. On a quarterly basis, BIC tracks consumer confidence in the safety of beef. Canadian beef safety ratings continue to be high. As of March 2009, 87% of Canadians gave beef a safety rating of 5 to 10 out of 10; however, we believe that consumer confidence in beef safety can still increase with enhanced education of Canada's food safety system by the Government of Canada. Food safety is everyone's responsibility, from farm to fork. The consumer is an important part of the food safety supply chain, especially when estimates suggest that about half of all cases of food-borne illness in Canada are due to

improper food handling at home. The continued investment in national multi-stakeholder organizations with a mandate for food safety education, such as the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education is very important.

The second recommendation for consideration has to do with labelling. In the past, mandatory safe food handling labels were introduced for ground meat. In principle, we support the concept of mandatory safe food handling information for ground meats because it can provide useful guidance on proper internal cooking temperatures. Many retailers already provide this information to consumers on a voluntary basis. A mandatory approach to safe food handling information, however, must not single out certain meat products or create the impression that there are two types of food: those that are hazardous and those that are not. In reality, sound, safe food handling practices are important when handling all foods.

• (1840)

A consultative approach to this issue will ensure provision of meaningful and relevant information to Canadians.

Mr. Marin Pavlic (Food Safety Manager, Beef Information Centre): The third recommendation is for Health Canada to approve the use of irradiation of ground beef. Food irradiation is a proven food safety technology that destroys disease-causing bacteria in foods. It serves the same function as milk pasteurization and pressure cooking of canned foods. Food irradiation is endorsed by many groups, including the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Food irradiation has been approved for several decades for a handful of foods in Canada, such as potatoes to inhibit sprouting. In the United States, irradiation of ground beef was approved in 1997. Scientific research, accumulated over more than five decades, shows food irradiation reduces or eliminates disease-causing bacteria in food, does not make food radioactive, and leaves the nutritional value of foods essentially unchanged. It is important to stress that food irradiation is not a replacement for existing hygienic practices in food production but rather another important tool in safeguarding our food supply.

In 1998 the Canadian Cattlemen's Association submitted an initial petition to Health Canada to approve irradiation of fresh and frozen ground beef to minimize the risks associated with *E. coli* 0157:H7. Proposed changes to the Food and Drugs Act to allow irradiation of ground beef were published in *Canada Gazette* 1 on November 23, 2002. In 2008, a review of scientific literature showing the degree of effectiveness of irradiation against *E. coli* 0157:H7 and salmonella in ground beef was submitted to Health Canada.

The irradiation of ground beef in Canada can offer an option to consumers looking to reduce the potential for food-borne illness caused by bacteria, especially *E. coli* 0157:H7. We are hopeful the government will consider this technology.

Ms. Lisa Mina: Finally, we recommend that the government ensure sufficient resources to monitor and enforce meat product labels. While product labels in themselves are not a food safety issue, they are a gateway to consumer perception of safety. A 2008 BIC consumer survey indicated that 83% of Canadians express a preference for Canadian beef. The term "Canadian beef", to them, was shorthand for a wealth of positive attributes, including that it tastes good, it's fresh, it's a product they trust, it's safe, and it's healthful. Hence, any labels or promotional material identifying beef as Canadian must be lawful and truthful. When misrepresentation of products occurs, the consumer may end up with a substandard experience, thus damaging the reputation of Canadian beef. Rigorous monitoring and enforcement of product labels play a role to maintain confidence in the perceived safety of food products, such as meat, in Canada.

To conclude, we are committed to food safety education with the consumer and the supply chain. We believe there is an important role for both industry and government to play. It is a shared responsibility. While Canada is a global leader in food safety, we believe Canada can raise the bar on food safety processes, regulations, public education, and the monitoring and enforcement of proper use of product labels.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Easter, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, folks, for coming.

First, I want to turn to the Canadian Meat Council on point 5. Part of this committee's effort is to look at the listeriosis issue as well. In point 5, you say:

During the listeriosis outbreak last summer, what our industry really needed was a voice and a face that Canadians could rely on, like we had during the BSE crisis and the SARS crisis.

You do go on to say that the government is doing a better job on H1N1.

Certainly some of us feel that because there was a potential election, and then an election on, and from an elite conference call that the minister was on—now that we've seen the notes the minister has provided this committee—it was very clear that the minister and the Prime Minister's Office seemed very concerned about the political damage and political spin. Do you think that was the reason there was inaction during the listeriosis crisis? Do you want to comment?

• (1845)

Mr. James M. Laws: I don't think it would be right for us to speculate on what that answer is.

Mr. David Anderson: A point of order.

The Chair: I have a point of order here, Mr. Laws. Sorry.

Mr. David Anderson: As Mr. Storseth did earlier, I'll remind Mr. Easter that it's important to stick to the facts here. The facts are that there was not inaction. There was good action on this file. The minister was at press conferences, I think, every day for two weeks. Certainly I don't want him to mislead the witnesses and then expect them to answer a misleading question.

The Chair: Mr. Laws, go ahead.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Just hold on, Mr. Chair. On the point of order, the facts are listed right here, Mr. Chair. I read them, and they are that during the listeriosis outbreak last summer—it doesn't say this in here, but I'll summarize it—the minister was missing in action.

We as a committee want to get to accountability and responsibility. The government may not have wanted to get to their responsibility during the listeriosis crisis, but I can tell you that we on this side do.

I think Mr. Laws was starting to answer.

The Chair: I think everybody does. Do you want to let the witness answer the question?

Mr. James M. Laws: Well, I can say that I think we've been very happy with the government's actions lately on the H1N1 flu virus. That's the type of response we'd like to see in the future for other food safety events like this one. We believe it should be the Public Health Agency of Canada and/or Canada's Chief Veterinary Officer out there reassuring Canadians.

I can certainly say that Dr. Brian Evans, during the BSE crisis, was incredible. If I were to get up there, that would be one thing. But you know, I'm a representative of the Meat Council. It should be Dr. Brian Evans, as a qualified person from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada out there making comments, not industry.

We certainly appreciate the government's action on H1N1.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes. As I said, I think they seem to have come around, but we have to keep in mind that 22 people died last year, and there's a great effort not to.... The Weatherill investigation is, in my view, clearly a cover in terms of getting to responsibility and accountability, and we need to get there.

Anyway, on point number two....

Mr. David Anderson: A point of order.

The Chair: I have a point of order.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Chair, there's been absolutely no evidence that there's any type of cover-up with Ms. Weatherill's investigation. She was here. Other witnesses have said that she's had access to everything she wants. She hasn't needed the subpoena power because everyone has been cooperative. Mr. Easter is trying to create something here, again, that does not exist, and I think he should be honest about that when he's doing his questioning.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chair, I guess you leave me no choice; I have to go to the facts of the matter. The fact of the matter is that Ms. Weatherill has no authority to subpoena witnesses and no authority to gain documents. She reports to the very minister, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, of one of the departments under investigation. Further, as was reported by Ms. Weatherill in response to this committee, we now know that six of the senior staff on her team are from four departments: Agriculture and Agri-Food, CFIA, the health authority, and Environment. Three of those departments are tied up in or are under investigation in the matter of listeriosis. Now, if you don't call that.... Then she reports to the minister, the very minister who's in charge, and he can decide. He said he will make the report public. As far as we know, to date she hasn't interviewed the minister.

So don't try to fool the Canadian public that this isn't an investigation to provide cover for the minister and the PMO, because it is.

My question on point number two is this. You say that you would like to create a Canada-U.S. food safety authority and also create a single meat inspection standard. I think Ms. Nicol talked about a uniform program at the national level within Canada. I don't know whether you both mean the same thing, but I think a lot of us on this committee are very concerned about, say, the small family sausage operation. If they have to meet Canadian Food Inspection Agency standards, they'll be out of business. Yet they provide safe, high-quality food. So we're very worried about one national standard, which will leave the playing field open to the big companies, such as Maple Leaf and so on, because they're the only ones that can afford it and also probably the only ones that have the staffing to handle the immense amount of paperwork required by CFIA.

Could I get comments back on what you really mean, Mr. Laws and Ms. Nicol? And how do we ensure that there are some of those small family operations...which provide high-quality product to the local market, primarily, as well?

• (1850)

Mr. James M. Laws: That's a very good question. Amongst federally inspected meat establishments, they're not all large. We have plenty of small ones as well. One that comes to mind has only 15 employees, for instance, so it's certainly not only because they're federally inspected that they would have difficulty necessarily meeting the standards. I'm sure Laurie could comment in that regard for the small players meeting the new, very good Ontario standards as well.

Ms. Laurie Nicol: In regard to your question, we have struggled with that, too, because we do represent small businesses; it has been a challenge. Yes, there is burdensome paperwork. But I think the world has evolved, and it is not only about the paperwork, it's about the due diligence. There are ways to achieve a food safety outcome. It may be a little different from the way the Canadian Food Inspection Agency wants you to do it, but the outcomes are the same.

That's where Ontario took the opportunity to actually develop a regulation that was outcome-based, and the national meat and poultry code had those parameters in there. We should never have to strive to export requirements when we're serving a domestic

marketplace, but that doesn't mean that if we're making 10 pounds of fermented product, or 10,000 pounds, we should be operating at different standards. I think it's a matter of how you achieve those standards that may be a bit different in the different inspection programs.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bellavance, seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What I am about to say is for the Meat Council representatives. Each time you testify, you tell us not only about your opinions and your concerns, but you also provide us with suggested solutions and I appreciate that a great deal. It makes our work easier and allows us to find out about things that we did not know. You are the experts in your area, and you are allowing us to learn a lot about it. You bring up points that we can ask questions about. I have some like that for you now.

You mentioned the approval of antimicrobial interventions, and I would like you to give me some technical details about that. You say that you got approval for some antimicrobial agents in September 2008. Six years earlier, Schneider Foods had asked to be able to use sodium diacetate in combination with sodium or potassium lactate. Just a month after the crisis that caused 22 deaths, approval to use the product was suddenly granted.

First of all, I would like to know what these products are and why they are not accepted in Canada. I assume they are in the United States. Often a few details cause the public to be afraid. For example, are these products injected into the animal or are they added afterwards, during processing? Are they chemicals? Do they change the taste, the texture or the smell of the food?

Mr. Martin Michaud: Antimicrobial agents like this are generally used to prevent pathogenic bacteria like listeria from multiplying when the product is being stored. They are additives that are put into the meat during processing, not at slaughter. The additives prevent the pathogenic bacteria from multiplying. That is what keeps the product safe.

• (1855)

Mr. André Bellavance: What happens when humans ingest the product?

Mr. Martin Michaud: We all have potassium lactate and sodium lactate in our bodies. They are just metabolites that are part of our system. They are not dangerous at all. Diacetate is a chemical additive that quickly breaks down into acetate and something else. In any event, these are common metabolites in human physiology. There really is no impact on our health. The goal is to prevent pathogenic bacteria from multiplying during storage.

When we talk about microbial interventions, we are talking about a whole range of other antimicrobial agents and additives in use in the United States. They have not even always had to declare these substances on the label. We do not have that luxury in Canada because the products are not approved. But all the studies and the scientific data show that these additives and antimicrobial agents pose no danger in the United States. In Canada, we are asked to do our homework again and to keep validating every time we want to use a new one. That is why we waited six years. But all of a sudden after the crisis, in September 2008, they decided to speed things up and to grant temporary approval for the sale and use of sodium diacetate.

Mr. André Bellavance: How long is the temporary approval going to last?

Mr. Martin Michaud: The temporary status will stay in effect until another decision has been made. The decision was to allow its use, but it is not yet officially in the regulations. It will be eventually. It is just that they are giving themselves time to evaluate the situation and make sure that it was the right decision.

Mr. André Bellavance: Is the decision made by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency?

Mr. Martin Michaud: Yes, in conjunction with Health Canada, of course. Health Canada decides which additives are and are not permitted. The agency makes sure that they are correctly applied, by establishing allowable limits and concentrations.

Mr. André Bellavance: Are there other products that you are asking to use, that could have been used to prevent bacteria from multiplying, but that are not yet approved?

Mr. Martin Michaud: Yes, there are a lot of additives on the list that are permitted in the United States but are not approved in Canada. There are probably about 40.

Mr. André Bellavance: Has the agency explained to you in the past why you still cannot use these antimicrobial substances? If they have sent you written explanations, we would like to get them. I am going to get right to the point with my other question because I have no idea how much time I have left.

If these substances have been used by Maple Leaf, do you think that the deaths in the listeria crisis could have been prevented? That is a crude way of asking the question, but...

Mr. James M. Laws: I will answer that question.

That might very well have been the case, but the fact is that Health Canada does not have the capacity to approve antimicrobials, or a long list of veterinary medications that the Food and Drug Administration allows Americans to use. As an organization, they employ 10,000 people while Health Canada employs about 800.

Canada should accept everything that the Americans have already approved. In 2009, there is really no use in conducting our own studies on products that the Europeans or the Americans have already approved. For products that are genuinely intended for food safety, we should be able to avoid redoing all the studies.

[English]

The Chair: Very quickly, Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: The agency banned those substances for all that time, but suddenly, one month after the deaths, it approved them. How did it explain that to you?

Mr. James M. Laws: We have not been told why Health Canada made that decision, but we are very pleased that they did.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Allen, seven minutes.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of you for coming.

I appreciate, Mr. Laws, the number of recommendations you've put into the report. Obviously, you've spent some time, and your agency has spent some time, thinking through these things probably from past experiences, because some of them may not be new.

I was hearing from Ms. Nicol earlier about going back to 2002, which I think is when she started that timeline for us about how we were looking at things, and here we are in 2009.

What I don't want to infer, Mr. Laws, from some of your recommendations is that there are some things that I might see that maybe you're not telling us. So I'm going to try to ask in a way that you can tell me whether indeed it's implicit in your number 6, when it talks about better training for inspectors. It says "CFIA inspectors need to have the regular consistent training", and it goes on to say that the new implementation of April 1, 2009... "many inspectors didn't know... about proper aseptic sampling techniques". I think we saw that actually in a news release that came out, where folks were saying they weren't able to do that. CFIA said their folks were unable to do the sampling because in some cases there was cross-contamination.

If indeed we're asking folks to be better trained, there's a resource commitment that needs to be made to that, which is a polite way of saying we need additional money. "Resource" always sounds really flamboyant and really nice, but the bottom line is, somebody write a cheque because we need some extra bucks to make sure we train the folks, because it takes money to train folks. You have to take them away, and if you have to take them away from their regular duties, it seems to me you need additional folks to backfill where they are, or you're paying them OT, overtime, I'm not sure which. Sorry about the acronyms—old habits.

Am I seeing that in there or am I not, in the sense of what your perspective is when you wrote this? Are you also saying—and make it the third question—that CFIA inspectors ought to be doing a little more inspection than what they're presently doing, and spending a little less time filling out forms and reviewing binders, actually being on the floor conducting inspections?

●(1900)

Mr. James M. Laws: Well, I don't think it would be right for me to comment on how much time they spend doing one thing versus the other, but we certainly know that their job is a combination of both. You cannot stop walking the floor, inspecting equipment, etc. But the meat industry today is not what it was 20 years ago. The equipment has changed. Processes have changed. All our members, for instance, are going to annual conferences. We hold annual symposiums. Education is a very big part of what we have to do at the Meat Council, as far as working with our members goes, and the same is true for inspectors. But in this particular case, with the new listeria rules, many of our members do hire food scientists, Ph.D.s, and veterinarians. Many people in our facilities are very highly trained, and they want to make sure, especially given the very onerous rules, that the samples are being taken properly so that they won't be subjected to some improperly held product or false positives because someone simply isn't familiar enough with the aseptic sampling techniques.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: I appreciate the fact that you believe you shouldn't comment on how much inspection versus how much reporting they should do, and I understand that, but do you have an opinion as to who should decide that? Should it be the processors? Should it be the plants? Should it be your organization? Or should it be CFIA, through the government? Where do you think that decision should be made?

Mr. James M. Laws: Well, I think if you look to other countries, for instance, if you're looking at the entire system, they do set up a section that looks at the risks involved and asks where the risks are.

As an example, when we were growing up, we all had meat in a can, and when I grew up, we all ate canned vegetables. Well, the industry has changed and now there's a lot more fresh vegetables or whatever. So this is a fairly foolproof method. There are some problems with it, but, generally speaking, there's not going to be any listeria left in this. So that's pretty safe.

The world has changed. The processes have changed. The retail sector is demanding longer shelf life. We've changed our lifestyle such that both partners in a marriage are working, so when everybody gets home, they don't have time to cook things like they used to. Everything's changed. So everybody needs to keep up with their training, and there are totally different processes.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: I understand about the canned meat.

Mr. James M. Laws: So if there was some expert group that would re-evaluate what the new risks are.... That's why we proposed in recommendation number 2 that since we do so much trade between Canada and the United States—it's such a major partner and a major customer of ours; it doesn't make sense, in our eyes, that Canada set up its own set of rules and the United States set up its own set of rules. It's the year 2009. The Europeans got their act together with however many countries they have. Surely, Canada and the United States could get their act together. Now is a very opportune time. The Americans are looking at what happened with the peanut butter situation. The new Obama administration said they're going to do something. We stepped up and had the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement several years ago. It's an opportunity. We know it's a fairly ambitious recommendation, but it can be done.

●(1905)

Mr. Malcolm Allen: The other aspect you talked about was educating consumers. We've heard from numerous witnesses about whether, at the end of the cycle, just before the fork, if you will, consumers are actually participating in the food system in a safe way. As well, there was the question of who contaminates food more—the consumer at the end or some folks in between. I think that's a debate for another day, but I do see that your recommendation number 8 talks about proactive concern and targeting the education: “Special attention should be paid to high risk groups such as the elderly, the immunocompromised and pregnant women.”

Now, when you say that you pay attention to those three groups, are you talking about processed meats, such as what we saw with listeriosis? Is that the inference that I'm taking? Or are you talking about those three groups as being targeted groups that we should always be looking at? Because, indeed, at those stages in their life and the things that are affecting them at that moment in time, they may be subject to things that others of us are not. For instance, you and I aren't going to be pregnant; therefore, we're not going to have to think about what we eat or consume or what we are around.

The Chair: Do you have a final question, Mr. Allen?

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Yes, Chair.

Ultimately, at the end day, is it indeed going to be a system that says we'll notify these three groups? And who's going to do it? The processors, the folks who make this, actually are telling part of their market, “Perhaps you ought not to buy our things.” That's a dangerous slope for a marketer who's trying to sell a product, saying to three groups of individuals, and these aren't small, and I would suggest to you—

The Chair: I'm trying to be generous here, Mr. Allen. Do you have a question?

Mr. Malcolm Allen: I know you are. You're always generous, Mr. Chair.

I'll let you carry on.

Mr. James M. Laws: I understand your question.

I think that after the events of last December it became very obvious that many Canadians were not aware of the recommendations on the Health Canada website, on the Centers for Disease Control websites in the United States, that yes, for sliced deli meats, an extra precaution needed to be taken for people in the high-risk group. So, yes, that's what we were referring to.

It's not that one should avoid those products, but if one is to consume them, it's clearly stated that those products should be reheated prior to consumption when you're in the high-risk category.

So you can deduce all kinds of conclusions from that, that Canadians, as a whole, didn't know enough about that. Now we're hoping that message will certainly get through, through the medical community, through those who look after elderly people in long-term health facilities, etc.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Laws.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for coming today. To all, thanks very much for your testimony.

Seeing that it's well after 7 o'clock, this meeting is adjourned until May 25.

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