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Tuesday, December 7, 2010

Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

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● (0845)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC)): We will call the meeting to order.

We have witnesses here from the CFIA.

Welcome, Mr. Mayers, Dr. Evans, Mr. Prince, and Ms. Dubuc. I imagine you have some opening remarks.

Dr. Evans.

Dr. Brian Evans (Chief Veterinary Officer and Chief Food Safety Officer, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Thank you very much.

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and honourable members. It's a pleasure to be with you this morning as we continue to collectively advance Canada's interests in food safety.

My name is Brian Evans. I am the chief food safety officer and chief veterinary officer for Canada with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

With regard to the audit that looked at certain aspects of the management of imported foods, I would like to provide you with an overview and some context.

The audit focused solely on the years of 2005 to 2008. It did not examine front-line inspection activities, as this was not within the scope of this particular audit. The audit assessed the management framework only.

Because audits focus on areas where improvements might be made, it would be tempting for people outside of the audit community to think that the reports reflect on the integrity or quality of the entire program. This is rarely the case, and certainly not the case in this audit.

[*Translation*]

Food safety is clearly the top priority of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

To provide Canadians with the protection they expect and deserve, we are continuing to look for ways to improve our system. To this end, the CFIA published the findings of our audit on imported food safety.

[*English*]

In response to the interest generated by this report, I want to assure this committee and all Canadians that all food sold in Canada, whether domestic or imported, must comply with the Food and Drugs Act and regulations, and the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act and regulations.

Simply put, the obligation to provide safe food is no different for food importers than it is for domestic food producers. Under these acts, importers have a responsibility to demonstrate that their food products meet the same high safety standards that Canada has established for domestic food producers. The playing field is level in terms of a food producer's or a food importer’s obligation to sell or distribute safe food.

I was heartened to see in a recent *Globe and Mail* and Nanos report that a significant percentage of Canadians believe that there is a greater frequency of inspection for imported food than there was 10 years ago. That speaks of a confidence in our inspection regime that I believe is well placed. Agency staff work hard each and every day to earn and maintain that trust.

The audit examined our activities around imported foods from 2005 to 2008. Since that time, in response to the rapid globalization of the food supply, the CFIA has taken decisive action on how we manage this food sector.

With regard to the audit itself, it provided us with valuable information that helped us to make improvements in how we conduct our business. Publishing audit results also provides Canadians with a window into the work we do, and we welcome that. It’s important that our work be transparent to Canadians.

We do not wait for either internal or external results from audits before making improvements to our programs and policies on imported foods. The agency has always been hard at work in this area. We will continue to make changes both now and in the future in response to a dynamic and ever-changing risk environment. Nevertheless, we certainly have used the findings of this audit to fine-tune those plans.

Drawing on $223 million in funding from the food safety action plan, which was announced in budget 2008, the CFIA was already independently working on some of the concerns identified in the audit. This included working on the need for better controls over imported products in the non-federally registered sector, which governs foods such as infant formula, cereals, candy, spices, and seasonings.

[*Translation*]

The government has enhanced the governance structure for food safety. Indeed, I appear before you for the first time in my new role of Chief Food Safety Officer for Canada. The creation of the CFSO role offers us the opportunity to raise the profile of the food safety work being done at the CFIA and the progress being made on the Weatherill recommendations by the agency and its partners.

● (0850)

[*English*]

One of our key partners, the Canada Border Services Agency, works with us to verify that food safety standards are met. The two agencies collaborate on border controls for foods imported into Canada.

Last year, the two agencies worked on 62 border blitzes together. Earlier this spring, the CFIA collaborated with the CBSA in a joint border threat and risk assessment exercise.

In addition, the CFIA conducts its own destination inspections to verify that imported food products comply with the appropriate regulations. We have increased our testing of high-risk foods that are imported into Canada. We carry out targeted surveys in multiple commodities.

The CFIA also conducts monitoring programs to check for various residues and metals in foods. The 2005-06 national chemical residue monitoring report was recently posted to our website. These annual reports show a consistently high level of compliance across all commodities from both imported and domestic producers. For example, the compliance rate for products tested in that specific report range from 96% to 100% compliance for both the 2005-06 and 2006-07 reports.

Another monitoring program, which looked specifically at residues and metals in children's food, also found very high compliance rates for both domestic and imported food samples. In the 2007-08 children's food report, 293 domestic products and 543 imported products were tested. The overall compliance rate was 99.7% for domestic products and 98% for imported products.

Mr. Chairman, the CFIA not only tests for food safety post production in imported foods; we also take pre-emptive measures to strengthen food safety before product crosses our borders. For example, the CFIA works with the California Leafy Green Marketing Agreement, known as the LGMA, to ensure that any leafy green product coming from California to a Canadian market is produced in full compliance with food safety practices of the LGMA and verified through mandatory government audits by USDA-certified inspectors. The agency was recognized for its support and commitment to high levels of government inspection with a Golden Checkmark Award from the LGMA this past May.

[*Translation*]

In another example of enhanced pre-border food safety, the agency has tightened its controls on meat imported from the United States. Importers will no longer receive advance notice of whether or not their shipment will require a CFIA inspection.

[*English*]

Mr. Chairman, when food is non-compliant, the CFIA responds by preventing the product from entering Canada or initiating a recall of the product. Additionally, the CFIA may also step up the frequency of inspection of certain importers or suppliers known to have been non-compliant in the past.

In a world of global supply chains for ingredients, it is clear that the achievement of effective import food safety controls requires that efforts begin before and go beyond border inspection. To this end, Canada collaborates very closely with other major food importing and exporting countries, such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the European Union. We share information about audits, risk assessments, recalls, and compliance in other countries.

On the policy front, the CFIA is on track to revise and update its import control policy early in 2011. In the meantime, we have established an integrated approach to forecast and prioritize annual inspection, sampling, and testing activities. This was done based on international information sharing and current best practices. The approach will help us to target our efforts where the risks are greater.

In addition, the CFIA recently launched consultations on an importer licensing approach that will contribute to stronger supply chain controls. Licence suspension is one enforcement action the agency is considering for importers who sell and distribute unsafe food products.

[*Translation*]

To support the field level, we are currently updating and modernizing procedural manuals, inspection tasks, training and lab methods. The agency's recent move away from a traditional commodity-specific management approach to a more integrated food business line will address resource pressures and ever-changing risks and priorities.

● (0855)

[*English*]

To speak further about our inspection regime, as part of the government response to the Weatherill report the Government of Canada conducted a comprehensive review of the design and delivery of the compliance verification system. Reports of the review are referenced in the fall 2010 progress report on food safety. The progress report was released publicly on October 21, 2010, and was published on the CFIA website with a link from the food safety portal.

Inspection staff and union representatives, who formed part of the review team, indicated that the CVS represents an improvement over past inspection approaches. Participants also recognized that the system continues to evolve, and made recommendations for improvement. The agency has taken those recommendations into account and is working to address them.

Mr. Chairman, armed with better information, improved methods, and an understanding of where potential gaps may surface, the agency will continue to promote safe food for Canadian consumption. We have a robust and effective food safety system in this country. Third-party and internal audits provide the government with opportunities to continually improve on those systems. They also provide Canadians with a window into the efficacy of our programs and services. We welcome the opportunity to demonstrate transparency in the work that we do.

Thank you Mr. Chairman. We'll certainly be happy to take any questions.

The Chair: That's it for opening comments.

We'll move into questions.

Before I do that, I would just remind members of the following:

> The obligation of a witness to answer all questions put by the committee must be balanced against the role that public servants play in providing confidential advice to their Ministers. The role of the public servant has traditionally been viewed in relation to the implementation and administration of government policy, rather than the determination of what that policy should be. Consequently, public servants have been excused from commenting on the policy decisions made by the government

Mr. Eyking, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I thank the CFIA for coming in today.

Canadians like to be able to eat healthy and fresh and local food as much as they can, but they know they have to get some from other parts of the world, because we can't always produce it. I'm glad to hear that you're working with the United States...or being a watchdog, I guess, in terms of products coming in. Many times the farmers here cannot use certain products, and we would hope that the Americans are complying also, that they can't use the same products and vice-versa. Over the last year we've heard, through submissions from farmers, that many times we're at a disadvantage because other countries have practices that we're not allowed to do.

You talked about the leafy vegetables, but let's talk a bit about... because we also talked to a lot of apple growers across the country who are in desperate shape. Cheap apples and cherries are coming in, and orchard growers are saying that there are products used on the fruit that's coming in from other countries that they cannot use, and many times the fruit is dumped here.

The apple growers also said that they used to make a little money on what they call the “drop apples”, or the number two apples, for apple juice. Now they're finding that all these apple juice concentrates are coming in from China, and other countries I guess, and it's taking them out of that market.

They're not saying they're scared of competition, but the reality is this: is the apple juice that we may drink at McDonald's or somewheres, that may be made from concentrate from China, being checked for residue under the same strict regulations you would have for apples grown in this area, for instance?

I'll start off on the apples and produce, and then I have some questions about the meat products.

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you, honourable member.

Mr. Chairman, I think the honourable member raises a very important point, and that is that the food supply is very much global. Part of the role of the CFIA, obviously, is to ensure that those products that enter Canada must meet the same standards as is required of Canadian producers. To that extent, the residue monitoring programs that we have in place, whether it be for chemicals, for anti-microbials, for heavy metals, or whatever the case may be, apply equally to imported products as to domestic. The design of those chemical residue programs takes into account not just those products that are approved by Health Canada, the pest management risk assessment agency, or others in Canada for use by Canadian producers; it also takes into account at the global level products that may have been approved in other jurisdictions and not approved for Canadian use. Under the chemical residue program applied to those products coming into the country, the same tolerances would apply whether those products were illegally imported into Canada and applied to Canadian domestic production or whether the production was done outside of Canada's borders.

To that extent, Mr. Chairman, I would emphasize very strongly that the work of our laboratory system at CFIA is tied intimately to ensuring that we have the test methods in place to test for not just those products approved in Canada, but products approved outside of Canada's jurisdiction. The complexity around this is in respect to the fact that these test methods must also be adapted to individual tissues: a test method that's used for meat, for example, may not be effective against dairy products, if you use the same test method.

We remain at the forefront, Mr. Chairman, in our alignment with international testing standards to ensure that we can verify that, for imported products, whether they be apples or other types of products, the chemical residue monitoring program applies equally as it would to a product produced in this country.

● (0900)

Hon. Mark Eyking: In terms of the meats coming into this country, you can see the vacuum-packed meat products in these club stores and in these stores that go in volume, and we've been notified that many times there is no inspection sticker or country-of-origin labelling on them.

Is it true that your inspectors ensure that there's no meat, in the retail, these packages that are coming in...that's inspected? What are we doing on those products that are coming in that they're having due diligence by CFIA?

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you for the question, honourable member.

Mr. Chairman, I'll ask Paul Mayers if he could address the issue of the labelling.

Mr. Paul Mayers (Associate Vice-President, Programs, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Again, that is an important question. The same holds for meat as Brian described for other foods. They are indeed subject to the same requirements as domestic products, both in terms of the Meat Inspection Act and the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act.

In the context of products that come into the country in bulk and then are sold—for example, the vacuum-packaged products that the member mentioned—these products are equally subject to the labelling requirements.

We have had it drawn to our attention that occasionally the retailers of these products put them on display without adding the additional labelling. That issue has been drawn to our attention. We have followed up in terms of that issue, because it is indeed the case that they are subject to those labelling requirements.

So in any circumstance where it is drawn to our attention, or through our inspection activities we identify, that these products are not appropriately labelled, then we take action in relation to the products to bring about compliance.

Hon. Mark Eyking: I don't know if I recall you talking about the apple juice concentrate coming in. You say the concentrate is checked coming in, when it lands here? Or does anybody go to these orchards in China to check what their practices are, or what organic matter they use?

It's really bothering these apple growers how cheaply it's coming in when they feel they're not getting the same guidelines.

Dr. Brian Evans: Again, thank you, honourable member.

Just to clarify, in the case of apple juice or apple juice concentrate coming from other countries, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, there is a combination of activities undertaken. There is that which we endeavour to do in the country of origin. Over the past several years we have started the deployment of CFIA staff to various posts around the world that provide us a window of inspection opportunity in other countries.

Currently that covers China, with our veterinary inspector based in Beijing, and we have one in Tokyo—

Hon. Mark Eyking: Sorry, but just on that, you would have one of our inspectors there, in China, going to check on how they're producing the crops?

Dr. Brian Evans: We have a presence in China. They may not necessarily visit the field directly. We have done audits. We have dispatched Canadian auditors to China in response to verification of activities of how the inspection system is operated in China, to validate the regulatory controls, to regulate how they do their testing programs, to follow up in terms of the certification processes.

As I say, we do have a full-time presence in certain regions of the world currently that collaborate with our partners, whether it's the U. S. or the EU. When they conduct audits they share their information of compliance with us. We adjust our border measures accordingly.

Behind that we also have, as we've talked about, the ability to do residue monitoring at the border or post-entry. If we have a suspicion, if information comes to our attention, either through sources such as INFOSAN or if there is an international recall of a product, we have the authority to stop at the border, to hold and detain and do further testing either at the border or inland, to validate that there is in fact no contamination of the product coming in.

● (0905)

The Chair: Thank you.

This is just a continuation, Dr. Evans, of where Mark was going.

I'll use the example of Chinese apple juice or apples, it doesn't matter. You said we put inspectors in place at the border to basically make sure that...you know, when it's coming in.

Is the cost of those inspectors totally picked up by Canada? Or is the cost somehow passed on to the importer, whether he's based in Toronto or Vancouver or wherever?

Dr. Brian Evans: Currently, Mr. Chair, the situation is such that the inspection activities carried out by the CFIA are not cost recovered to the importer in that regard. We are proposing at this point in time, on a go-forward basis, a licensing regime that would provide us with a different range of activities and enforcement tools to deal with the issue of how inspections are carried out and who carries out the inspections, but that regime is in development at this time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bellavance, seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for being here to discuss food safety. It is a crucial issue not only for our committee, but for government in general because it goes to the issue of public health and safety. So, it is always a pleasure to have you before our committee on this subject. Obviously, we have many questions to ask, and seven minutes is not long.

Mr. Evans, you referred to a poll according to which 44% of Canadians believe that there is a greater frequency of inspection for imported food than there was 10 years ago. Obviously, this is a poll, it is strictly a perception. If 44% of Canadians believe that, that means 66% do not. Among that 66%, some people may not have wanted to reply; perhaps others have a different opinion, but, undoubtedly, a perception poll is not a reliable way of finding out whether things are really that much better and that we are actually doing inspections.

We know there is an increasing number of imported food that ends up in our stores. Seventy-nine per cent of imports come mainly from the United States, but also from emerging countries for which there have been some concerns as to food safety. It is not up to me to judge what other people eat, but I can judge what they do when their products come over here. That is something we can speak up about. So, products from Mexico, China, Chile and Thailand, etc., are increasingly appearing on store shelves.

Public perception is one thing. The perception of people in the know is something else. Perception is not the only thing. People in the agricultural sector find that the current inspection system for imported goods is inadequate. On that note, the Union des producteurs agricoles whose annual convention was held last week issued a recommendation to the federal government regarding imported goods.

I have already asked a question in the House on this point specifically, because we knew that there were more and more questions being asked about the CFIA's role and whether it is actually capable of carrying out these inspections. According to the UPA, the ideal solution would be to create a federal agency responsible for the monitoring of imported goods, in order to create reciprocity agreements at the border and to allocate the necessary resources, powers and tools to enforce these requirements. So, that should be the CFIA's mandate, right? However, the UPA believes the work is not currently being done adequately.

Do you believe it is up to the agency to create this type of office, or should this type of process be created within the agency. Or rather, should we create a dedicated agency to deal specifically with the inspection of imported goods?

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you, honourable member.

In answer to the question, I will make two quick points at the outset. The poll referenced was done by *Globe and Mail* and Nanos. Obviously I take the member's point very clearly. If one looks at those who believe that the level of inspection is the same or has increased, you get into the 70% area; it's not that people believe it has gone down or that we're not doing an adequate job.

If you further pursue the information that was contained, a number of polls conducted by both the government and the private sector continue to show that anywhere from 70% to 85% of Canadians demonstrate a degree of confidence in the food supply in this country and the safety of their food.

I think the member talked very eloquently about the challenge of a global food supply, which is a reality, and the challenges that poses not just for CFIA but for food regulators at a global level. When one talks about the responsibility for safety, that clearly falls within the mandate of CFIA on imported food. I don't think there is a need to duplicate or create alternate administrative mechanisms to assure food safety in imported food. If one wants to talk about issues around economics and dumping, it is outside the purview of CFIA to undertake to do that.

As we indicated, we expect to have in place in early 2011 a revised import control policy to govern the full range of food products imported into Canada—those that are both what we would refer to as regulated, and those that are non-regulated sectors at a domestic level. In addition we carry out activities, and it is very important that when we reference equivalency agreements and reciprocity agreements, we have specific agreements in place with a number of countries around the world.

We have memorandums of understanding with China, and an active Canada-China food safety committee that met just last month. It is co-chaired by our Chinese counterpart and Dr. Richard Arsenault from CFIA in Canada. We have a similar mechanism with Russia. We have active engagement with the United States on a daily basis at a technical level. We now have CFIA staff embedded in Washington working with the FDA on a daily basis.

In the area of fish and seafood, for example, where problems have been identified in the past, we have put in place agreements that raise the level of technical expectation. We carry out audits in those jurisdictions where concerns have been identified, not solely by Canada but by other trading partners as well, to ensure they can achieve the standards that are necessary for them to have the privilege of accessing the Canadian market.

● (0910)

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: If that is your mandate, Mr. Evans, why are we hearing that far more inspections are carried out on documents than on food?

And why is it that the agricultural sector itself believes this type of entity should be created—they call it an inspection bureau—exclusively for food inspection?

Earlier on, you were referring to vegetables coming from California. We're not talking about China or India. It is not far away. The Americans are our neighbours, but we are aware of the fact that they sometimes use products that are prohibited here.

Mark was referring to apples earlier on. The same thing applies to other foods. There may be pesticides used in the U.S. that cannot be used here, yet the food ends us here anyway.

You referred to the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement: these foods need to be approved by the USDA. First of all, does the term “approved” mean the same thing as “inspected”? What type of inspections do they do?

Is the CFIA informed of these inspections or is it simply approved by them, and they say that it is all right and the food can come through? So that that is a trade issue more than a food safety issue? Aside from this, will the CFIA do its own inspections?

I know full well that if Brussels sprouts enter the country, the agency will not inspect each individual Brussels sprout in each box. However, when there is a shipment that enters the country, people want to be reassured and know that each time products enter the country, an inspection is done according to very strict guidelines. If that is not the case, are we simply taking a look at documents and saying it's okay because the USDA agreed to have it sent to Canada and that we trust them?

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you, honourable member.

Perhaps I will share this answer with Paul Mayers.

Mr. Paul Mayers: Our approach very much takes multiple layers. First, at the international level we work within the Codex Alimentarius so the international standards that govern food safety and foods traded internationally are consistent, and the interpretation of those standards in their application is consistent. Canada is an extremely active member of Codex Alimentarius to assure ourselves that the international standards governing foods moving in trade are indeed robust enough to provide the protection we desire.

Second, we work directly with our trading partners. So to continue the example of the United States that the honourable member mentioned, we work extremely closely with both the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration in the U.S., the two regulatory agencies in the United States that cover the food supply.

That robust engagement with the U.S. is a day-by-day engagement. It isn't an occasional discussion. We are engaged with our counterparts in the U.S. on a daily basis. As Dr. Evans mentioned, we've embedded staff directly with our counterparts. When we manage events in Canada, we're open to inviting USDA to participate in those events. We share joint events with them.

We audit our U.S. counterparts in terms of their food safety activities, so we have a very clear understanding of their inspection strategies. Dependent on the specific commodity, some products that come to Canada from the United States come with formal certification on the part of the U.S. in terms of their oversight; other products come into the country as a result of our understanding of the inspection oversight that's employed in the U.S. and our confidence in our trading partner in terms of the quality of that oversight.

Then the third layer of coverage is, of course, the work we do here in terms of inspecting products that enter Canada at destination. As Dr. Evans has overviewed, we conduct a robust program of inspection, sampling, and testing. The national chemical residue monitoring program, as just one example, undertakes chemical testing of not just domestic product but imported product as well.

That information allows us to apply targeted strategies to any areas where problems have been identified. Dr. Evans spoke to the border blitzes we've undertaken with the CBSA, those targeted actions that allow us to focus on any commodity where we've seen problems in the past. We apply an approach whereby we take a representative sampling in terms of our inspection approach, but if we identify a problem, that product moves to 100% inspection until the exporter can again demonstrate he has his system in control, and we can move back to a more representative approach.

So we apply a comprehensive and robust approach to imports, which allows us to have confidence that we hold imports to the same standard as we hold domestic products.

Thank you.

● (0915)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move to Mr. Atamanenko for seven minutes.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Thank you.

Larry, before we start, it's my understanding that if members are in agreement, I can split my time—in this case with Malcolm. Is that okay?

The Chair: Oh, yes, that's your choice.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Okay. Thank you. We have our specialist here, so....

Thanks very much for being here. I will try to be quick in order to give you time to answer questions.

My first question deals with the importation of horses for slaughter. It's my understanding that there's a list of drugs, such as phenylbutazone and nitrofurazone, that something like 96% of horses in the United States take—in addition to many others. Any of these drugs, according to the journal *Food and Chemical Toxicology*, are banned in terms of human consumption because of their serious and lethal idiosyncratic effects, adverse effects, on humans. In other words, if they're administered once, there's no way, ever, that animal could enter the food chain.

So if in fact roughly 96% of horses in the United States use banned substances, how can we ensure that these horses do not enter the food chain?

The other thing is that there's a form that folks have to fill out now that asks if any drugs or vaccines have been administered during the shortest time of the following three periods: since January 31, 2010; the last 180 days; or during the time you owned the animal. Theoretically, that could mean somebody could get a horse and have that horse for a day and say that no drugs have been administered.

In terms of the drugs that are permissible with a quarantine, how can we monitor that animals can stay in quarantine for six months? And how can this be manageable in feedlots where they're then not allowed to have any drugs? Would they or would they not be susceptible to diseases such as strangles?

Those are my questions. I have some documents, from the New Holland plant in Pennsylvania, that shows that basically most owners have signed and just put an address and a signature; they haven't checked the boxes. It's really sloppily done. It makes a mockery of the forms that we have given them.

I'll stop there and let Malcolm continue with a couple of questions.

● (0920)

The Chair: Can we let them answer your questions and move on?

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Okay. I just wanted to make sure Malcolm got a few minutes.

Mr. Paul Mayers: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The control of veterinary drugs in horses for slaughter operates on the same basis as the control of drug residues in other meats. We operate a testing program. The drugs that you mentioned are part of that testing program. In fact, in the testing that we've undertaken we have an extremely high level of compliance—100% compliance—in relation to those banned substances.

We operate that program of testing for the very reason that you've noted, that these are compounds of concern in terms of human health. As a result of our concern in relation to those compounds, it is important that a part of the oversight program includes assessing the potential that residues of those substances that are a risk to human health are not present in product used as meat.

In addition, as you've noted, our primary market for horse meat is the European Union. We've worked very closely with the European Union in relation to their import requirements. Of course, a key element of being able to access their market is being able to provide them with assurance that these compounds are not present in the meat. We are able to do that and continue to enjoy access to that market as a direct result of a comprehensive program of controls. Those controls include controls in relation to the animal.

You speak to the issue of before-slaughter assurance that withdrawal times are met. We do that through the combination of the information, through the forms that you've described, as well as through a program where, if information is not sufficient, the horses are excluded from slaughter for a six-month period.

The control, in terms of providing that assurance, relates to our oversight in terms of the documentation associated with each animal. That facilitates our ability to assess that animals have indeed met those withdrawal periods.

That, combined with our veterinary oversight as well as the testing program that is a part, gives us, as well as our trading partners, the confidence that meat derived through that slaughter program meets the standards established.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Thank you.

I'd like to pursue this, but I'll give Malcolm some time to put questions.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): I appreciate what Dr. Evans said earlier about imported foods, and equivalencies, and inspection regimes overseas. My first question is related to recommendation seven in the Weatherill report...what actually said that you would do an independent audit of the CVS system, which is actually a homegrown system. Ms. Swan has said you haven't done it.

So the first question, obviously, is how do we have confidence that we have equivalencies over there when we don't have them here?

I only have two minutes, so let me put my second question.

When you talk to equivalency audits, you're saying that they're done. The only one I've seen to date, that's been posted on your website, is the one for the U.S.

Have they been done? If they have been done, how many have been done, and when will they be posted to the CFIA website so that we can actually look and say that we indeed we have seen them. I include the ten major countries in that: the U.S., Mexico, China, France, Italy, Brazil, Chile, Thailand, Australia, and the U.K.

I'm saying that very quickly, simply because you'll know I'll run out of time, Dr. Evans.

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you very much, honourable member.

I'll reiterate, Mr. Chair, that with respect to the CVS system, there was a comprehensive review done in response to the Weatherill report. That review took place at three different levels, and we can reiterate those points if it's so desired.

When we—

● (0925)

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Let me just interject and add to the question, because I'm going to run out of time.

If I'm hearing you correctly, you're telling me that from your perspective, from CFIA's perspective—I don't want to personalize this, Dr. Evans—recommendation seven is now checked off and complete.

Is that the answer I'm hearing?

Dr. Brian Evans: I guess my short answer to that is that CFIA was asked...because the determination of the review, as it related to the resourcing side, was done third-party. It was removed from CFIA to ensure that there was a very transparent, credible exercise done.

So we generated the numbers that we had, in-house, and our calculations were then provided to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, who let a third-party contract with PricewaterhouseCoopers, who determined that the methodology and the figures that we provided, from their perspective, fully met the expectation and were credible numbers with respect to the resource needs for the CVS program.

Obviously, with respect, I would never say, in any situation with Weatherill, that we should ever say it's done. I think food safety says we don't stop, we don't say we've finished. We have to continue to improve on a day-to-day basis. Weatherill, to me, is more an effort for us to say, taking into account Weatherill, we will complete the actions that were asked of us, but they should continue to inform us: they should be evergreen. I don't think we should ever say the check mark is done and we don't do that work anymore. It requires us to continue do that work on an ongoing basis in order to ensure that the food safety system continues to evolve with respect to the risks that are out there.

With respect to the question from the member on the issue of audits, yes, we are in the process now of updating our website with audits that have been conducted of other jurisdictions. As I said in my other remarks, the reality of globalization of food is that it is a team sport. It does require us to work with the United States. We take into account and share the information of audits that the U.S conducts in third countries, we take into account and share the information with the European Union in terms of their audit group out of Dublin and the work they do in third countries, and we share the work that we do in third countries with those groups, as we do with Australia, New Zealand, and a number of others.

Again, we do believe we are getting a very good level of information, not only in terms of equivalence of systems internationally for inspections but also in getting very up-to-date information from multiple sources that complement the work that we do directly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thanks very much, Chair.

Thank you for being here today.

I want to highlight an assessment that was contained in a report on OECD countries. There's a quote in there about Canada, that it was "one of the best-performing countries" in the 2010 food safety performance world ranking study, and that its "overall grade was superior". This was a report on OECD countries, and it recognized Canada's strong performance.

I think part of the equation has to do with the number of inspectors, but I think that's only part of the equation. It's easy for the opposition to focus on that because you're talking numbers here. We never really get a suggestion as to what the ideal number is from them, but that's what they focus on.

I actually think the inspectors are part of the equation; behind them is a system of food safety, which consists of processes, sub-processes, to ensure that food is safe for Canadians.

I'm wondering if you could elaborate on what's behind the inspectors and some of the changes that have been made, and how this is serving Canadians with respect to food safety.

Could you talk about some of the processes and sub-processes?

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you very much, honourable member.

Mr. Chairman, again, I have testified at this committee on multiple occasions, and I'm firm in my view—a view that has been reinforced for me by experts in Canada and beyond—that the food safety is about a system. It's not about a single inspection point in a broader context. You cannot test and inspect your way to food safety because of the nature of food production.

In backing up our front-line inspection staff, we do recognize at the CFIA that food production doesn't start at processing. Food production starts with the ecosystem, it starts at the farm, it requires stewardship at all levels of the production system. Food safety is about a culture, and that culture does require us, as CFIA, to make sure that what we are doing in terms of integrating our animal health observation programs, in terms of disease, antimicrobial monitoring, those types of programmings, our biologics programming, that they link very closely to food safety outcomes.

Similarly, on the plant health side it requires that we are very much cognizant of the contribution of vegetable protein to the food supply and that we look very closely, whether it's at issues of dioxins or aflatoxins or vomitoxins, so that it also becomes very much a part of a food safety outcome. Those go beyond the individual inspection that might take place when an animal or plant is transformed into food.

Equally around that, and I think highlighted in the OECD comparative, was the recognition that Canada has a regulatory framework that is robust. It covers a broad range of commodities. We acknowledge up front from regulatory modernization, legislation modernization, that is work we continue to do because we want to stay in a leadership role at the international level. We want to ensure we have the tools and necessary authorities to protect Canadians in the most appropriate way.

The report also talked very positively about the food recall system in Canada, and the level of traceability that we've started to implement in this country. While there's more that can be done, Canada has made significant investments in traceability, and in the area of the food recall area, again there is recognition that we are active in the marketplace. We don't wait for human health issues to arise in order to start a recall process. We have mechanisms in place that through either industry information or our regulatory oversight could also trigger recall activities. We can trigger activities based on complaints, or we can base it on third-party information, again coming back to that international collaboration or teamwork that suggests if there is a recall in another jurisdiction, or information that comes to our attention, that it can be dealt with effectively.

I would give two very classic examples of that. One is melamine in China, which affected significant dairy supply, particularly infant formulas in China, and led to hospitalization of tens of thousands of infants in the Chinese circumstance. Our relationship both with China and New Zealand, who was intimate to the commercial side of that detection, gave us advance warning that there was a potential issue out there. Based on that information alone, Canada took a forefront lead in terms of developing the test methods necessary to be able to test dairy products in our laboratories in Calgary and our food labs across the country. Those test methods became the international standard for testing for that work.

So again, full credit to our science group, which gave us the tools necessary to ensure that Canadians were not negatively impacted by the melamine scare, which did affect other countries beyond China, but not Canada.

● (0930)

The second very concrete example would be the contamination of the animal feed supply in Belgium several years ago with dioxins, as a result of oils from transformers inadvertently being added, through the recycling program, into animal feeds. That created a significant problem for Europe because of the eggs and meat and other products, particularly dairy products, derived from the animals fed those feeds.

Again, our relationship with the EU and early heads-up border controls ensured that no Canadians were ever exposed to the dioxin issues with the product imported from Europe.

It was not a popular decision, I can assure you. The timing of that outbreak.... It was in the spring of that year, just before Easter, and a number of major chocolate producers in Canada lost their supply of milk for chocolate products.

Again, those are the types of decisive actions that are part of the system that protects Canadians. When information comes forward, risk decisions are taken, and action follows immediately.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: If I can, I'll just follow up on those. Those are two excellent examples, but there's another one that's more current as well. Saputo, as you know, has done a major recall of cheese. I'd like to know whether the system worked in that case. The Saputo recall is reaching into many different provinces. It affects a whole product line.

Did the system work in the case of the Saputo recall?

Dr. Brian Evans: Absolutely. Obviously, changes were incorporated into Canada in response to the tragic issues of 2008, even in advance of the Weatherill report, as to how we ourselves and well as the private sector undertake to surveil both the environment and the end product.

The trigger on the current recall, in fact, was CFIA testing of end product in a sandwich combination on the east coast as part of that programming, and we did detect listeria in the sandwich product. Obviously there was a lot of concern at the outset because of the ham and cheese component of this. Was it a meat issue? Was it a dairy issue?

We were able to demonstrate very clearly that it was not the meat side of the equation of the sandwich but in fact the cheese component, which led us back to the scenario with the company in Quebec. We were able to isolate the potential area of contamination to one line of production in their massive undertaking. We were able, with the company, to ensure that the production ceased while we carried out a more targeted listeria investigation.

The trace-outs from that, as you say, have been quite extensive. It is one of the largest cheese manufacturers in Canada. Their level of distribution or penetration of the market is significant. The challenge, again, when we come back to the issue of traceability, remains that the tracing of the primary product has led us into a number of secondary and tertiary suppliers. So people who manufacture these types of sandwiches, major grocery chains that put out deli trays, and those sorts of things do require us to be vigilant, and that's what we're doing. We've had great support from the company.

I can't say enough about the support from the provinces, but that is also part of the food safety system in Canada. It's not just CFIA. It's not just the federal government. We have provincial people out there also helping us to verify the effectiveness of the recalls as they're currently being played out.

● (0935)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Very good. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll move to Mr. Tonks for five minutes.

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here. I found it very educating. I don't sit on this committee, but certainly I can appreciate the challenge that the committee has and that you share in terms of protecting the public.

I'd like to follow up on the line of questioning that Mr. Allen pursued. I was given the Weatherill report as background information. I'll tell you, there's a word that gets everybody's attention around this place, and that's “audit”, and the role of the auditor. As soon as you mention that, everybody responds in a Pavlovian way. They know this is serious stuff.

Mr. Evans, you've used the term “review” with respect to the Weatherill report. I'm going to quote recommendation seven of the report:

> To accurately determine the demand on its inspection resources and the number of required inspectors, the [CFIA] should retain third-party experts to conduct a resources audit. The experts should also recommend required changes and implementation strategies. The audit should include analysis of how many plants an inspector should be responsible for and the appropriateness of rotation of inspectors.

It calls for a third-party review, and it does use that word: audit.

In terms of the review that was done of the CFIA report on the CVS program, it stated a very important caveat:

> This review does not constitute certification or guarantee the accuracy of CFIA's calculation since the review did not involve, for example, either of the following:
>
> Detailed testing, analysis or validation...of data...
>
> Technical or other assessments of CVS tasks in terms of appropriateness of... frequency, or duration [of interventions and so on].

Those are inspector-significant caveats.

I guess my question is can the public be absolutely satisfied and secure, given that there are still those caveats? In my experience, it's the on-the-ground inspectors and the inspections that make the difference with respect to what falls between the cracks.

I do appreciate very much, as I'm sure the committee does, the citing of improvements that have been made and changes that have been made—for example, in the relationship with border security and other issues. I'd like you to have the opportunity to give a response to the question in general but also with regard to what it means to the public.

Dr. Brian Evans: I can't say with enough passion, I think, how much we value the contribution of this committee to our efforts to ensure food safety for Canadians. We also recognize the passion, commitment, and professionalism of our front-line staff and what they do each and every day—each and every shift—to deliver food safety for Canadians.

With respect to recommendation seven, I think it's clear that from our perspective a comprehensive approach was undertaken. With respect to the PricewaterhouseCoopers report and the statement that the member has shared with us, it is a professional audit firm and is required to identify the scope of the work they undertake to do, which, in this case, was an independent review of CFA's assumptions, calculation methodology, representations, and results. PWC declared in the report that they found CFA estimates to be sound.

So PricewaterhouseCooper did indicate in the report, very eloquently, that the methodologies, calculations, assumptions, and representations were fully sound within the parameters of their expertise allowed to assess.

Reference was made to the fact that the appropriateness of the frequency and duration of the CVS test was not allocated to PricewaterhouseCooper. In fact that was given to a third-party international panel of two individuals, one from the United States and one from Canada, with, combined, over 50 years of international experience in food inspection methods.

These two individuals wrote a report commissioned by us on the technical aspects of CVS. Each panellist came to the conclusion—and the report was part of the government's report on food safety progress—that CVS is a sound system, and that it has made a significant improvements in inspection.

There were some recommendations given to us to provide greater flexibility for inspectors, so that if they were to find something they would be able to park the task they were doing and address the emergent issue immediately. We have taken this on board as part of our continuous improvement of the system.

They felt that, overall, the time allocations and descriptions of tasks were appropriate. They also recognized that a single window of time is not necessarily an appropriate measure. You may have a plant with 15 production lines or a plant with a single production line, and there have to be allowances made for the complexity of the production environment. Our system allows us to do that with the tasks that are currently described.

The third element we talked about was a front-line inspector input carried out by CFIA, with the full support and participation of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. This would involve a field assessment of CVS, in light of the views of the staff and the union. Those three collectively, we believe, met the intent of Ms. Weatherill's request. We believe that Canadians can have confidence in the system as it's currently being delivered, and that they can rely on these recommendations to continue to drive improvement in the future.

● (0940)

The Chair: Your time has expired.

Mr. Shipley.

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

My thanks to the witnesses for coming in.

We're talking about imported produce this morning, but a number of factors come into it. I had the opportunity and the privilege of being on the subcommittee for food safety.

One of the things that came up after that—actually, from one of the opposition people—was that, well, we have truckloads of produce coming in from the States, they've been destined for inspection, they're going through the border, nobody's inspecting them, and so now what we have is suspect produce, I guess, that is not being checked that was determined to be.

First, is that true?

Second, I'll be honest with you; I was astounded to find out that prior to that subcommittee—members on this side made the recommendation that this be changed—importers who sent food into Canada were given 72 hours' notice that their truck would be inspected. I couldn't believe that was still happening. So we made the recommendation that it should be random.

That's my second question: is that in place, and if not, why not? And when will it go into effect?

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you, honourable member.

Mr. Chair, I'll answer the first portion, and I'll ask Cameron Prince if he can address the second issue on the 72 hours' notice to adjustments.

With respect to produce entering from the United States, again, I think it's important for us to restate that we work very closely with CBSA in managing the import issue at the border.

With respect to produce coming into Canada, we base our risk-based determinations of inspections based on what we know about the source. We've talked about the leafy green circumstance in California and programs that have been put in place to ensure that contamination with E. coli doesn't happen again, as we saw several years ago. That is a program that is both industry-delivered and also oversighted and verified by USDA full-time inspectors. We have assurances from that. We also audit and verify that program at specific frequencies ourselves to demonstrate that program is operating effectively.

We have the pre-border aspects that do take place. We talked about the fact that over the past year we had 62 different border blitzes, where all products coming in at those border points were examined to make sure they were in compliance with Canadian requirements. We carried it out over 480 targeted inspections based on various commodity combinations of risk in the marketplace and across this country last year on products coming in, primarily from the United States.

We also have destination inspection in Canada that also allows us to do further sampling in the produce area. We support industry both in terms of quality of product but also safety of product with sampling programs that occur there. I would not sit here and say that every truckload is stopped at the border and inspected physically, but we have a system in place of oversight based on international science-based standards for sampling that we believe provides a high level of confidence that the products coming into this country do meet the domestic standards we have in place, which are designed to protect Canadians.

Cam, I would ask if you could address the issue of the recommendation from the committee on the 72 hours' notice.

● (0945)

Mr. Cameron Prince (Vice-President, Operations, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Yes.

Thank you for the question with respect to imported meat procedures.

It is true that in 2009, at that time companies could give notice 72 hours in advance and get clearance on whether their shipment was going to have to be inspected in Canada or not. Based on the recommendations of the food safety subcommittee of this committee, we took action as quickly as we could on that, based on that recommendation.

As of January 4, 2010, no prior notice has been given. In fact, trucks arrive at the border, and we have developed a system with the Canada Border Services Agency where border services officers have the information on their screen right at the booth at the border and can direct that truck to inspection or to the skip lot, which means it doesn't have to be inspected. Almost 20% of shipments are actually physically inspected at registered plants; the remainder have a very good product history and are cleared to go through with certification from the U.S.

Yes, indeed we have put that system in that place. We have had a few glitches with that system, and we are now refining it, making it more automated, making it more modern. We look forward to increasing rigour at the border with respect to meat shipments.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time has expired.

Ms. Bonsant for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Thank you very much.

I'd like to get back to chemicals. Some countries allow chemicals which are prohibited in Canada, and the opposite may also be the case.

Earlier on, you said that exporting countries fill out forms to indicate which products had been inspected.

On these same forms, is there a spot that indicates that, in Canada, you are not allowed to use given pesticides or the product will be turned back? Or is it a bit of a catchall form where people can write whatever they like?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Mayers: I thank the honourable member for the question.

The control around approved products in Canada rests with our colleagues at Health Canada. However, in terms of our oversight responsibility at the CFIA, it focuses on the food product. Canada does not determine what another country might do in terms of the product it chooses to approve; however, for products that are not permitted in Canada, Health Canada, in addition to making their decision, establishes what is called a maximum residue limit.

That maximum residue limit is established even for products that are not permitted in Canada. In essence, it sets the level of, for example, a chemical residue above which there are human health concerns. Our responsibility at the CFIA, through our monitoring program—the chemical residue monitoring program—would be to assess products, including imported products, to assure ourselves that those products do not contain residues above that maximum residue limit.

It is through the maximum residue limits that are established in Health Canada standards that we've provided the controls to assure Canadians that they're not exposed to products that Health Canada does not believe are acceptable in terms of human exposure.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: I am asking the question because, recently, someone found glass in a pickle jar imported from India. Is the CFIA stricter towards some countries? Do you carry out the same product inspections for all countries or do you say to yourself, in some countries, the environment is less of a concern than the economy? That is why I was wondering whether you had more reservations towards certain countries.

● (0950)

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Mayers: Most certainly not. We do take a risk-based approach, and so in our risk-based approach we take account of compliance history and areas of prior challenge. In managing those issues, if we see repeated areas of non-compliance, we will work with the country to improve the compliance outcome. At the same time, we will apply here an elevated level of oversight where problems are identified.

I'll use an example. We experienced in Canada an outbreak of disease as a result of a parasite, cyclospora, associated with raspberries. The raspberries that were associated, through our investigation, were identified as coming from Guatemala. We increased our oversight in terms of testing products, but we also undertook a very significant program working directly with Guatemala and producers in Guatemala to institute additional controls at the level of production to minimize the potential that those products could become contaminated with cyclospora, as part of—as Brian has described—a systems approach to providing assurance that Canadians would not be exposed to that particular pathogen.

The same holds for the examples you've mentioned. We have had an issue with glass in pickles. We've acted in terms of those products by undertaking detentions, etc. If that is not an isolated issue...and occasionally a plant will experience problems when they're working with glass; they may have a higher level of breakage than at other times.

But if we see a pattern, we would then work with India, say, around providing in-country assurance before products leave India that this issue has been addressed. This is part of the strategy we normally employ, and this is what we mean by a risk-based approach. Where there is a higher degree of risk, we will place a much greater targeting around that product and hazard combination.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: What if the country in question continues and at some point—

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Bonsant, I'm sorry. Your time has expired.

Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank you all for coming out this morning. It's great to see you.

You know, I'm never scared of an audit. On my own farm, I used to hire somebody to come in and audit things just to see what I could do to make things better, to do it in a constructive manner. Canadians expect us to go through an audit once in a while and expect us to be looking at new ways and new technologies to make things better.

One area that I'd like to talk about is automated systems. What are you seeing in automated systems that are going to make things easier and better? Could you give me a few examples of that?

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you, honourable member.

Mr. Chair, I would echo that from a CFIA perspective. I would suggest that CFIA is one of the most audited organizations in Canada. Canada is a global supplier of food. We are one of the preeminent suppliers of food at the global market. We are audited by virtually every country that we export to at some level. There's probably not a week that goes by when there is not an audit team from another country here, whether they're looking at the fish program or the seafood program, whether they're looking at the horse meat program or whatever commodities we're involved in exporting.

So we have a lot of third-party external audit that takes place. We're here today because we have a very rigorous internal audit process, which we as management very much value. We do recognize the value of those efforts because they do guide us in terms of continuous improvement. We're not afraid of audit. We think it is very important. It raises both awareness and transparency about what we do and how we do it. We value the inputs of others because we want to be the best we can possibly be.

With respect to new and emerging technologies, I do agree that I think there are significant opportunities in the food safety area around those technologies. Whether they're automated, or even if they're not, certain of those technologies do require assessment processes. Again, some of the non-automated ones we would make reference to are the additives that Health Canada must approve for addition to foods as microbial inhibitors. For the automated side, there are high-pressure packaging opportunities that a number of industries are investing in also as a way of controlling or eliminating bacteria. Certainly there are a number of automated technologies as well in terms of new and sophisticated detection methods.

My colleague Dr. Dubuc can speak to some of the implementation of those technologies within our laboratory system, where we can scan for a wide range of possible contaminants or adulterants with a single sample put-through. Certainly I think the other aspect around some of the automated technologies will also apply to our field staff in terms of new tools that can be brought to their work in the field, in terms of hand-held technologies that allow for rapid analysis of the information that they're seeing, and validation of whether or not there is a risk or not a risk associated with the products they are in fact assessing at that point in time.

I think also we are starting to see at the global level some of the automated technologies related to tracking and tracing: the ability of radio frequency tags and the ability of animals to be tracked through an automated system, from their point of tagging through to the point of slaughter, and then the subsequent products that are produced from those animals being tracked as well, right to the level of your steak at a restaurant with a bar code, or in the marketplace, in those areas.

Traceability and those technologies are very much intimate to, I think, public long-term confidence in food. They want to know where their food comes from. In many areas, they want to know the production practices associated with that food as well from social values, so I think we will continue to adopt these technologies into our processing as they continue to emerge, where they've been validated and invaluable. It will in fact give us better food safety outcomes going forward than we can even achieve today.

● (0955)

Mr. Randy Hoback: Thank you.

I also want to touch on this a little bit. A lot of people don't understand CFIA's role in the export of our goods outside Canada. I'll use the example of blackleg in canola going to China, and how quickly we reacted to that situation and tried to remedy that situation.

Can you just give us an update on the process you use when a situation like that happens? How do you react so quickly?

Dr. Brian Evans: We recognize very much the importance of exports to the sector in Canada. We believe that Canada's reputation, at the global level, is demonstrated by the number of countries that import food products from Canada. They do that based on the quality of what our producers produce. They do it based on the safety of the product and the integrity of the inspection system.

When we run into issues like the blackleg of canola circumstance or other areas, we operate at three levels. It's always based on science. We start with a scientific approach in terms of internationally recognized science standards for management, whether it's for a pest, a disease, or a residue. As a science-based regulatory organization, we think that science has to be part of the equation. It may not be the ultimate and only consideration, but we certainly want a science-based outcome. We try to base our import standards that way, and we hope that the countries will reciprocate because they recognize that we're going to treat them on that basis as well, with respect to international standards.

The second level of engagement, obviously, is with the sector. The impacted sector has a vested interest in wanting to ensure that our undertakings with the country take into account their vital interests. They are able, in many cases, to bring their importers to the table as well, which creates a different environment in terms of how those discussions could take place in the other country. We want to make sure that there is both public and private engagement to resolve these issues to everybody's best satisfaction.

Certainly the other component, and one that, in many circumstances, we're not shy to use either, is the recognition that we need to set, at the very highest level we can possibly achieve, a commitment to resolution that's in both countries' best interests. In that circumstance, we engage with our partners at Foreign Affairs. We make extensive use of our embassies abroad and the ambassadors abroad. As I say, through funding we've received over the last several years, and by having CFIA professional staff embedded in certain countries, we've been able to build positive relationships with other countries so that they have an understanding of what we're doing and they understand the integrity of what we're doing for their benefit. And they give us insight into the real impediments that exist in the other countries.

At the same time, we very much value the opportunity that DFAIT and others bring to the table in terms of when they may make a recommendation for more political involvement, from Canada's perspective. Again, I think it's very value-added: in any circumstances where there are strong political, science, and economic interests, we will get resolution of those issues much more quickly.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to Mr. Eyking, for five minutes.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Thank you, Chair.

The parliamentary secretary was alluding that the opposition was being a little rough on you today. But at the end of day, people have died of listeriosis, and the Auditor General has given a report, so I think it's our obligation to ask tough questions.

My next question is going to be more about our exports, because we focus a lot on imports. It seemed to be, when I was in the vegetable business, that when I shipped cabbage to the States, they never inspected my cabbage if the supply was short. They always inspected it when there was a lot of cabbage. We see it with the potatoes from P.E.I. We even see it now with Christmas trees. When there's a big supply in an area, it seems that inspections are harder or more intense. We see it with the Koreans now with the beef. I think, at the end of the day, their inspectors are becoming a bit of a trade barrier. It's not a food safety issue, many times.

Your mandate is mostly to protect Canadian consumers, but I'm wondering if our CFIA can help our exporters more. You see what's happening in Europe now, where there are no borders between the different countries in Europe when they ship products back and forth. Can we make our border more seamless with the Americans in a way that our regulations are the same? Can you be helping our exporters more by maybe helping them at the front end?

For instance, if there's a load of potatoes in New York that somebody's rejecting down there for a frivolous reason, maybe your inspectors can come in there and say, “Okay, hold 'er, guys, this is unfair”.

I don't know if it's your mandate, but could you be doing more for our people? At the very least—and we don't want to go down that road—I'm wondering if you could say, “You guys want to play the hammer? Okay. Maybe we're going to start stopping a few loads coming in.” I know we're the good boy scouts, and we don't do it like that, but I really think that the others are doing it.

I would like just a couple of short answers, because my colleague here has a short question for you.

● (1000)

Mr. Paul Mayers: Responding to situations where Canadian exporters experience challenge, we see it as very much a part of our role when those challenges are related to sanitary or phytosanitary measures. In the examples that you describe, we absolutely believe we have a role, because it speaks to the credibility of our system. It speaks to our export certification and related activities, so we feel very much empowered to engage in support of Canadian exporters in those circumstances.

We engage, again as Brian has described, in those three categories. I won't repeat them in the interest of time, but we engage to explain the science and the approach that we've taken. For example, Canada has experienced occasionally, in terms of seed potato exports, instances where the containers are rejected. We don't hesitate in those situations to put technical officials on a plane to engage. If necessary, we'll send inspection staff to go and have our own look, so we can assure the exporter and ourselves of what's at play.

We're not at all shy about engaging our trading partners. They have legitimate rights to raise concerns. We respect those rights, but we will certainly engage with them in terms of ensuring that any decisions taken are legitimate.

The Chair: Mr. Valeriote.

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you.

We received a response to an order paper question on inspection staff. It said inspection staff is stationed in field offices, laboratories, and food processing facilities across the country, within four operational areas and eighteen regions. The number of total field inspection staff that was given to us in March of this year was 3,342.

Of that number, can you tell us exactly how many—part time and full time, exact numbers—are dedicated to the beef industry?

Mr. Paul Mayers: Mr. Chairman, it's important when one considers inspector numbers to understand the agency's operating parameters. We cover plants that slaughter more than one species. We, in terms of our coverage at meat processing, cover plants that handle much more than just beef. Our focus is to ensure that we have the right inspection staff to cover the food safety requirements of Canada.

We don't break down our numbers by who's covering—

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but could you provide to me, to this committee, in writing, the number of full-time equivalents that you have dedicated, of the 3,342, to the beef industry so that we have an answer? Is that a fair question?

An hon. member: He just answered it.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: No, he didn't answer it.

The Chair: I think what Mr. Mayers—

Mr. Francis Valeriote: I'm just looking for a number, Mr. Chair.

● (1005)

The Chair: I know you are. I'm just trying to point out that I think what he's saying is that it may not be quite as easy as what you're asking, because the inspectors—

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Mr. Evans, I think, wants to answer.

The Chair: —inspect a number of different industries.

Go ahead, Mr. Evans.

Dr. Brian Evans: I appreciate the question in terms of trying to break down an inspector to a specific species. Again, you're into that reality where, in our world, we have people who have designated authority under the Meat Inspection Act. He may be doing poultry, pork, or beef under those authorities.

Similarly, under the animal health circumstance, we have inspectors who are designated under animal health. Some of that may be humane transportation. He may be looking at a mixed load. There may be cattle on that load, or there may be other components to that. He could be doing a disease investigation on a rabies call, which may or may not relate to a cow; it could relate to other species.

We can certainly give you hard numbers. We know the number of inspectors we have at any given time in the organization, and we can tell you the authorities they operate under, but they are not required, on a daily basis, to fill in a time chart and say, “Today I did ten minutes for the beef industry and *x* minutes for another industry.” Their time is not tracked in that way.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Richards, you have five minutes.

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to focus on the inspection staff as well. Our government has hired, I believe, 538 new inspection staff since we've taken office, and we're hiring another 170 inspectors to fill some of the gaps that may exist in the system.

That's a lot of inspectors to hire in that period of time. Obviously these people don't simply walk in off the street and start inspecting plants the next day. There's a process they go through to be fully qualified and fully trained to meet the standards we would expect from our inspectors to ensure that our food is safe for Canadians.

Can you give me more information and background on exactly what type of background these people have when you hire them, what kind of training they go through, and what length of time it takes to complete that kind of training before they can begin inspecting our food to ensure it's safe for Canadians?

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you, honourable member. I'll ask Cameron Prince to address your question.

Mr. Cameron Prince: Thank you for the question.

Yes, we are in the process of hiring staff. We've received funding for 170 new inspectors. I'm pleased to announce that as of today we have hired 157 already.

The people we're looking for to do these kinds of jobs have technical or science backgrounds preferably, although there are many people in the meat industry who have very intimate knowledge of the industry, in combination with technical backgrounds. We're looking for people who have graduated from community colleges or university in food science and have related meat experience.

As far as the training goes, we've recently implemented a very comprehensive 29-week training program for meat inspectors. There are nine weeks in class learning how to do the inspection tasks under the compliance verification system, learning how to do sampling, and learning how to use technology for IM/IT tools, and that sort of thing. So it is very comprehensive.

During the other 20 weeks they work with experienced inspectors to be mentored to learn how to conduct themselves with the industry and do inspection and compliance activities. It is quite a comprehensive training system we've put in place over the last year.

Mr. Blake Richards: Great. Thank you very much.

I have a question for Mr. Mayers. The last time you were here before the committee, your response to a question from Mr. Allen was as follows:

> The U.S. posts their audit of us. We post our audit of them.
>
> In terms of the issue, which is food safety, any audit process will of course identify any issues. We respond to those issues just as we would if an audit weren't happening. It's our inspection staff who take the action—and when they saw issues, they did—because our inspection staff accompany the U.S. auditors. They report on the actions and findings. That's why, in their report, they directly indicate that the Canadian authority responds appropriately to these types of events.
>
> Indeed, plants were delisted. They were issued corrective action requirements, which they promptly responded to, and they were then re-listed. That's the same as would happen if, absent an audit, we found a problem. We would similarly take direct action and issue a corrective action requirement, which we would expect them to respond to immediately.

So essentially what you're saying there is that not only do we fix any problems we see at home, but we also audit U.S. plants and identify any problems that need to be fixed there as well.

I know that Mr. Hoback's questions touched on this a bit already, but can you tell me what work you might do in conjunction with countries other than the United States? What other aspects do you undertake to ensure that food coming into Canada is safe?

● (1010)

Mr. Paul Mayers: Thank you very much for the question.

Indeed, the approach we take with other countries is similar to that with the U.S., where we undertake formal audits and assess the ability of the competent authority in that country to provide an oversight that we consider to be equivalent to what we undertake in Canada.

But our approach does not stop at audits alone. Where there are specific questions we will pursue bilateral arrangements with other countries. For example, we developed a memorandum of understanding with Thailand on seafood safety, because we were experiencing some problems there. I spoke of the example of cyclospora in raspberries and the approach we took with Guatemala.

So in working with other countries we seek to assure ourselves that their systems of oversight and the controls they put in place can provide a reasonable assurance, before products reach Canada, that those products are of the quality and safety we expect of products produced in Canada.

We further assure ourselves, by using the verification approach of our own inspection and testing here, that those controls have been robustly employed in that country of origin. It is a comprehensive approach that takes account of the circumstances in other countries and works with their competent authorities—our regulatory partners in those countries—to provide that ongoing assurance.

As Brian has said, you can't just inspect and test your way to safety. Just as we depend on a system here, we hold others to account to provide that same systematic demonstration of control in other countries.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll now move to Mr. Storseth for five minutes.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for coming, witnesses.

I have a quick follow-up. When we're dealing with exports and this stuff, how important is it that we continue to do it through a science-based approach rather than, say, an economic or a political approach?

Mr. Paul Mayers: I can start, and Brian might wish to add.

The science-based approach is critical, because countries may take different views in terms of their trade policy, but the science is the science. When we found our decision-making on the science, we establish a basis of communication that is consistent across borders. It then allows us, in terms of that conversation, to focus on understanding what is demonstrated, where there may be uncertainty, and how we might measure and address any uncertainty that exists.

In the sanitary and phytosanitary sphere there's Codex Alimentarius for food safety. Its actions are based in science. In terms of animal health, there's the World Organization for Animal Health, the OIE. Again, it founds itself in the science. The same holds true in terms of plant health through the International Plant Protection Convention. We have a very solid international framework to facilitate the interaction between trading partners, and it is grounded very solidly in science because it serves as an equating consideration.

Brian, would you like to add something?

● (1015)

Dr. Brian Evans: I would add two points in terms of the merits of the science approach.

In all real terms, in the absence of a science approach we would have no recourse mechanism. Under the World Trade Organization, in fact, because the WTO recognizes the science-standard organizations that Paul referred to, it is through that WTO process that the science foundation becomes the merit of a WTO challenge. Of course, that's not Canada's preferred approach—we would prefer to deal with these issues bilaterally whenever possible—but in those cases in which Canada has engaged with the WTO, whether it was the salmon case with Australia or the hormone case with the EU, in all circumstances it has been the science foundation that dictated the outcome of the WTO process, and when we were found to be in compliance and others weren't, those decisions went in our favour.

There is the recourse reality of having a science foundation. It is vitally important, as Paul says, to make sure there is a sound foundation.

The other component, though, which is equally important for Canada in terms of our exports, is the fact that it does allow for reciprocity. If we jointly recognize the science, it gives a predictable competitive market for our industry because they understand the requirements that will be placed upon them and they can then bid and develop their programming accordingly. I think it enhances the competitiveness and the predictability of the international marketplace to some extent, and from an import perspective it also allows us to demonstrate, as we've talked about earlier today, that the standards we're going to apply for you to get in to Canada are the same standards that we're applying within Canada. It is a level playing field.

Mr. Brian Storseth: In terms of the 57 recommendations from the Weatherill report, CFIA was given until September of next year to implement them. Are we on track for getting those 57 recommendations implemented in time?

Dr. Brian Evans: Yes, absolutely. As you pointed out, in her report Ms. Weatherill provided a two-year window in which to achieve that, and I think we have made significant progress, as was demonstrated in the October report this year. We will be on track to achieve all the implementation that was expected in the Weatherill report, but I'd like to re-emphasize what I said to an earlier question: I would not want anyone to think that, having achieved the parameters of those recommendations, we just turn around and stop. That's not how we operate. That's not how we will operate in the future. We will continue to use Weatherill as a guiding approach to ensure that we can continue to deliver a food safety system that is as good as any other in the world.

Mr. Brian Storseth: My last question for you is about front-line inspectors. I think we sometimes get bogged down with front-line inspectors and think front-line inspectors are the only mechanism we have. Could you talk about the role of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's science branch in backing up the front-line inspectors and what they do, and could you perhaps use the example of listeriosis?

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you very much, honourable member.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to ask Dr. Dubuc to supplement my answer.

I would just lead by saying that certainly I do believe, as I've stated on a number of occasions in this committee and elsewhere, that the work of food inspection and food safety is a team sport. Certainly the front-line inspector is a very important tool for us in terms of achieving food safety, but in the absence of those behind them.... They can draw a sample, but if there's no confidence in the testing program behind them, if there's no risk assessment process that helps prioritize and define those areas where we should be focusing our resources, then the program will not be nearly as effective.

I would ask Dr. Dubuc to talk about the very important role that our science professionals play in food safety, and in animal health and plant protection as well.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Martine Dubuc (Vice-President, Science, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Indeed, Mr. Chairman, there are various measures which contribute to food safety. Inspectors do their job, but they are supported by an entire team of professionals who aim to provide the best scientific advice possible, the best lab results, based on internationally-recognized and validated methods.

The agency has a network of 14 labs throughout the country, including 9 that carry out food sector analyses. The network is made up of experts, researchers and lab technicians who carry out food analyses according to various inspection programs to detect a number of pathogens such as bacteria, salmonella, listeria, E. coli, as well as viruses, toxins, parasites, pesticides, chemicals and allergens. All of these analyses are carried out according to nationally and internationally developed, validated and recognized methods.

The government's recent investment in the Food Safety Action Plan has allowed for a considerable increase in the monitoring of food safety and imported goods through a targeted sampling program which aimed, among other things, to ramp up the monitoring of imported goods in the agency's unregulated sector. In other words, over the last few years, the agency has carried out monitoring programs through its registered institutions. The Food Safety Action Plan's main purpose is to increase the monitoring of imported goods.

Allow me to tell you a little bit about the progress the agency has made over the last few years.

Under the Food Safety Action Plan, that has been in place since 2008-2009, a number of samples were tested including imported vegetables, imported ingredients, dairy, bottled water, and products that were processed prior to coming to the country, which were tested to detect the presence of allergens, microtoxins, bacteria, viruses, parasites, toxins and pesticides. During the first year of the program, the agency carried out seven targeted studies on vegetable products. Further, we tested for salmonella, listeria, shigella and E. coli 0157:H7, pathogens which are very well known within the sector. We took close to 2,000 samples within the first year, 6,800 tests were carried out on these samples, and we obtained satisfactory results in 99.9% of cases, which is very good.

In the second year, 2009-2010, we doubled our monitoring of imported goods, carrying out 14 studies on targeted products including, in this case, spices, fine herbs, products like peanuts, and again, we tested for the presence of bacteria and viruses on close to 8,200 samples. So, we more than doubled the number of samples collected and carried out over 24,000 tests in our labs. Again, we obtained satisfaction ratings of 99%. In the second year, we also tested for chemicals and allergens in over 22 monitoring studies, and again, achieved satisfaction rates of 98%. This year, we will be testing over 25,000 samples throughout our lab network. We have developed methods to support these analyses. Over the last two years, the agency and its lab specialists have developed over 19 new methods to monitor the safety of imported goods.

In closing, the agency also created a service to improve the efficacy of our food analysis; this service is offered seven days a week. So, the labs which provide food analysis services are now available seven days a week to ensure that analyses are done within the shortest timeframe possible. Through these various measures we feel that we can reassure your committee: we have increased the monitoring of imported goods.

● (1020)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for coming today. That was very informative and very detailed.

I would just take this opportunity to wish you all a very Merry Christmas. Have a good one, and thanks again.

Members, we now have to go in camera to take care of some business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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