

Food safety outcry grows

Heat turned up on politicians as consumers want guarantees

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Food safety has emerged as a major federal campaign issue as a listeriosis outbreak at a Maple Leaf Foods processing plant in Toronto continues to claim lives, 18 and counting.

According to Canada's top medical journal, the outbreak is the worst epidemic of listeriosis in the world and warrants a public inquiry, not just the promised independent investigation.

The latest crisis has put the spotlight on Canada's inspection system, prompting lobby groups and political parties to weigh in on an issue that rarely garners election attention.

For one Calgary mother, whose two young daughters fell sick last year with a virulent strain of E. coli from an unknown source, extra emphasis on food safety -- from farm to fork -- is welcome.

"It gets to the point sometimes that you question whether anything is safe," Tanya Maksymic says.

Indeed, five years after a devastating disease was found for the first time in a homegrown cow, mad cow's fallout is still being felt by ranchers and meat processors who gathered at a Calgary hotel a few days ago to talk about fallen exports.

The cattle crisis never claimed a human life, but widespread fears of meat tainted with bovine spongiform encephalopathy possibly infecting people with a form of brain-wasting disease set off border closures around the world, many of which remain closed today. The cost in lost beef exports has been huge -- \$700 million in 2006 in Alberta alone.

"Alberta's role as a major exporter of livestock and meat has been eroding, even as world meat consumption continues to grow," Alberta Agriculture Minister George Groeneveld told the gathering.

"Consumers in . . . Japan, Korea and China and other important export markets are increasingly concerned about food safety, as we all are." On a farm south of Cochrane, longtime cattle rancher Harvey Buckley isn't surprised by the increased scrutiny he and other farmers face.

He's noticed interest in food safety growing in recent years as people become more conscious about their health and the environment.

Another shift is increasing globalization. With more food moving around more countries, consumers, government and health officials are increasingly demanding products be fully traceable.

Buckley, a councillor with the Municipal District of Rocky View, is eager to comply.

"The export market is our livelihood," he says. "If any rancher sitting on the hills can't figure that out, they're out to lunch." Although traceability became a priority for the federal and provincial agriculture departments after the mad-cow crisis and emergence of avian influenza in poultry, it isn't yet mandatory in Alberta.

Though many livestock producers have been reluctant to buy in, Groeneveld says, as of January verifying the age and origin of cattle will become a must.

These changes are needed to gain access to more export markets, Groeneveld argues. While he acknowledges some of the restrictions facing Canadian meat are rooted in protectionism, he says strengthening international regulations are also at play.

To underscore his point to the Calgary gathering of ranchers and meat processors, Groeneveld offered a local example. An Alberta processor is shipping in millions of pounds of beef from Quebec because it can't find enough traceable beef here.

"If that isn't a market signal, I sure as heck don't know what is," he says.

The listeriosis outbreak has also sent signals to the market, to consumers and to Canada's inspection agency.

Maple Leaf Foods reopened its plant last week amid estimates the company will incur a \$20-million loss. Regaining customer confidence in the brand will likely take a lot longer.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has brought in tougher rules for makers of deli meat, requiring they disassemble and aggressively clean meat slicers, but a political debate remains over the direction of the agency.

In March, a new compliance verification system was introduced for meat plants. Federal government inspectors have been asked to place an emphasis on auditing company inspections instead of direct visual inspections.

Other contentious changes are in the works, although Harper said on the campaign trail last week final decisions haven't been made.

Unions representing food inspectors and veterinarians, however, are blaming recent changes to Canada's meat inspection system for the deadly listeriosis outbreak. They've launched a website to encourage voters to keep food safety on the election agenda.

They also want an additional 1,000 inspectors and veterinarians hired.

Buckley, the cattle rancher, disagrees with the unions. He says shifting to an auditing-centred system makes sense because food safety is just as vital to producers and processors as it is to inspectors and consumers.

"The dilemma is, if they are going to inspect every speck of product, it would take a whole army and I'm not sure it would help a lot," he says.

At a Calgary butcher shop and deli, co-owner Rick Barnhart says business has in fact picked up since the listeriosis outbreak. He says customers are telling him they don't trust the meat at chain grocery stores.

Cherill Rosenau is one of Barnhart's customers. She drives about 15 kilometres to visit Calgary Meats & Deli once a week.

"They are local. It's all Alberta grown. It's everything you would want to have in a grocery store," Rosenau says, adding she steers clear of "mystery meat." Calgary mother Maksymic has become more cautious about the food she buys since two of her four daughters were inexplicably stricken with E. coli in 2007, part of a wave of 57 cases in the city that summer.

When news of the listeriosis scare broke, Maksymic's heart jumped. In July, Julia battled a serious case of cramping and diarrhea. Maksymic says her daughter's doctor suspects the illness may have been tied to listeriosis.

As a result, cold cuts are another food crossed off her grocery list.

Where the parties stand on food safety

- Tories -- Days before the election call, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper promised an independent investigation in the listeriosis outbreak. He said no final decisions have been made regarding pending changes to the country's food inspection, adding the government was re-examining the system and its gaps. Some changes to food inspection were already brought in on March 31 at meat processing plants, including the Maple Leaf facility linked to the listeriosis outbreak. The new compliance-verification system puts an emphasis on audits of company records, instead of direct visual inspections.

- Liberals -- Pinning the blame for the ongoing listeriosis outbreak on the Harper government, Liberal Leader Stephane Dion said he would pump \$50 million into strengthening the "safety net" to ensure Canadians have safe food and water. The Liberals pledged to hire 100 more food-safety inspectors and ensure a greater hands-on presence. Dion wants a public inquiry into the listeriosis outbreak, contending an independent investigation isn't sufficient.

- NDP -- Leader Jack Layton would put a federal inspector in every meat processing plant, stop proposed withdrawals of meat inspectors, and toughen standards for imported meat products. He also thinks a public inquiry into the listeriosis outbreak is warranted.

- Greens -- Party Leader Elizabeth May has advocated returning oversight of food inspection to Health Canada, contending the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is too focused on agri-business. The party would also review food safety regulations.

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