

# Behind Canada's new food guide

Canadians' right to have more available government-generated information on healthy food choices is more and more in jeopardy.

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By KEN RUBIN



The revised *Canada's Food Guide* came out last week by Health Canada without Prime Minister Stephen Harper taking centre stage to explain the new choices for healthy eating. Instead,

Health Minister Tony Clement, looking rather awkward, launched the new guide from an Ottawa Loblaws superstore.

Not everybody is going to buy into the updated and customized backup diet advice this most widely-distributed government publication officially offers.

That's, in part, because there are some differences in determining what is known about or constitutes healthy food choices.

Critics have already said that the new food guide puts too heavy a diet forward, doesn't have enough emphasis on some of the best nutritional choices, has serving portions that are difficult to understand, and has no real direct advice on food products to avoid.

There is also caution about the food guide's advice, given what is known about the behind-the-scenes politicking that went into the food guide's development and content.

Records obtained through the Access to Information Act, as early as 2005, indicated that the new 2007 food guide, several years in the making by then, had the influence of the food industry behind its development. The advisory group, for one, had a large number of industry people on it. And correspondence indicated that food industry representatives wanted the food guide to downplay what is a "good" or "bad" food and have each of their products given prominent mention.

Using the Access to Information Act, I had earlier discovered that the previous 1992 food guide had as well been influenced by some food industry representatives before being finalized. For instance, meat, egg and dairy industries had their serving amounts upped before the 1992 final food guide was released.

A share of the multi-billion food marketplace is no small matter to them.

The matter of influencing food choices does not end there.

Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) notes prepared in anticipation of a meeting last year between Canada's largest food industry group, the Food and Consumer Products of Canada (FCPC) and the CFIA president, indicate that FCPC would raise several concerns "associated with labelling initiatives and their enforcement." One area CFIA noted that could come up is the "more restrictive" criteria for "no sugar added" claims, according to documents obtained through access to information.

Frito Lay Canada/Pepisco also came forward to promote their version of a healthy choice diet called "Smart Spot."

CFIA and Health Canada officials weren't about to officially endorse or condemn such industry health and wellness programs that also included Kraft's "Sensible Solutions" program.

The CFIA records indicate that the CFIA and Health Canada were more inclined to work with groups publicly charting consistently healthier food choices. Thus, without endorsing them, they were working with the "Heart Smart Program" of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada to identify with a checkmark foods based on certain criteria as good and healthy choices.

Other CFIA records indicated that CFIA had concerns with various food products falsely claiming to be nutritional supplements like certain sports energy power drinks and bars. Food inspection reports indicated that too many of these products were in non-compliance with labelling requirements and so they sought—not always successfully—voluntary compliance.

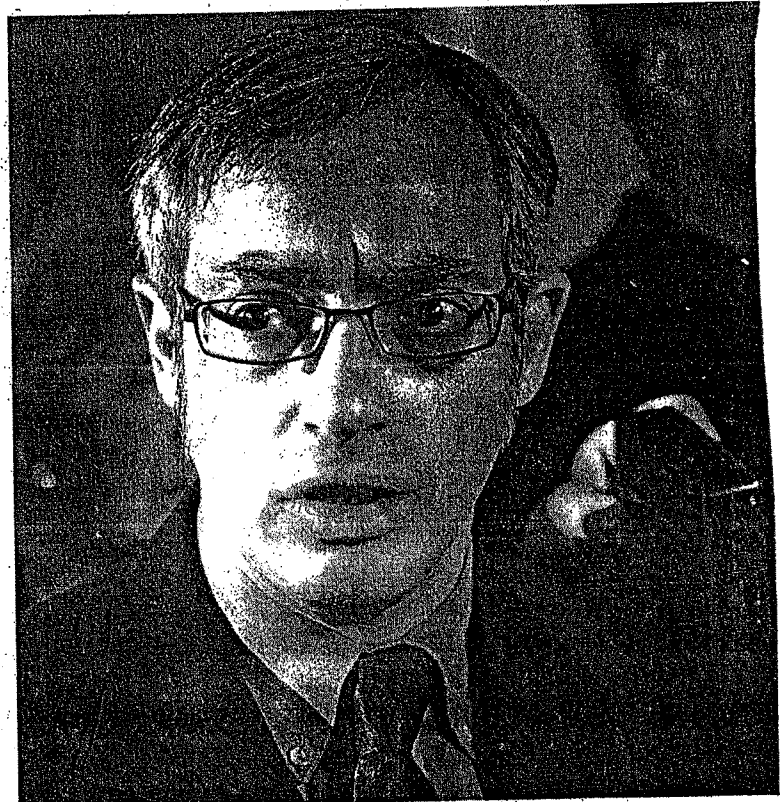
The food industry is moving even further into fortified and processed foods and wants to be able to claim their products as having health benefits. Those public field inspections reports; if effectively continued and publicly available, likely will reveal further violations. Expect things to heat up over what's okay to eat and what's not.

But finding out about violators in non-compliance on matters like labelling and sanitation may become even more difficult under recent changes to access legislation under the Accountability Act.

Records indicate the Canadian Meat Council had "sought changes to the existing system" of meat inspection reports and assigned-CFIA ratings, given the way they are "used by the media." CFIA, the records noted, was "proposing to eliminate" such inspection reports and ratings.

But that could mean there would be much less public knowledge on how safe such meat plants are.

CFIA notes say that the meat industry did not like "the (reputed) area-to-area inconsistency" or the "misperception" that



Photograph by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*

What's cooking: Health Minister Tony Clement launched Canada's new *Food Guide* last week in Ottawa.

meat inspection reports with a rating of "B" or "marginally acceptable" tag implied. From the industry's viewpoint, that did not make such meat packaging plant facilities as inspected really any "less safe."

The emphasis now is on greater and more frequent food industry self-inspection and less public inspection.

One problem with this approach is that industry's self-policing reports are judged to be commercially confidential.

The Canadian Meat Council, CFIA records note, "would prefer a single set of standards for both the Canadian and American markets." The frustration is over United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) meat inspection standards, given the BSE scare and meat safety concerns, having different inspection requirements such as the "recent USDA imposition of product testing for listeria monocytogenes and of daily visits in eligible U.S. meat processing plants."

Having prepared a report on an "Ecological Diet for Canadians" at the time the 1992 Food Guide came out, it's amazing too the new 2007 Food Guide doesn't pay much attention to environmental considerations as a fairly large imprint

to blend consciously into its advice. Locally-grown foods and what is put into them and the soil to grow them or alter them, are not part of the new *Canada's Food Guide*. Nor was there any supplementary advice given on what should be done if some major outside pandemic hits Canada and disrupts the food distribution marketplace.

There's no Prime Minister taking decisive leadership by announcing targets and regulations for a better, more sustainable food system, or cutting down on growing obesity. Furthering "smart" deregulation and test-tube foods continue to have a climate of acceptance in Ottawa.

There's little appetite to turn tough or go back to the wartime agenda when the first Food Guide rules issued were considered more of a necessity. Canadians' right to have more available government-generated information upon which to base or have their healthy food choices is more and more in jeopardy.

Ken Rubin is a long time consumer advocate and organic farmer.  
kenrubin@rogers.com

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