

Ottawa wanted U.S. to accept more lenient meat inspection regime

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BY BILL CURRY OTTAWA

The Canadian government strongly opposed tougher U.S. rules to prevent listeria and lobbied the United States to accept Canada's more lenient standards, internal documents reveal.

Briefing notes prepared by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency for an April 7, 2006, meeting with the board of directors of the Canadian Meat Council outline how both industry and the Canadian government were frustrated with the increased precautions the United States was demanding.

Specifically, Canada opposed daily inspection visits and the

testing of finished products for *Listeria monocytogenes*.

Further, the documents show the CFIA agreed to the meat packing and processing industry's request to end a 20-year-old practice of having inspectors issue reports and rankings on facilities. The Canadian Meat Council complained the reports were ending up in the hands of reporters through the Access to Information Act, leading to bad coverage.

Jim Laws, the executive director of the council, which represents Canada's meat packers and processors, said yesterday that he believes he attended the meeting.

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Producers successfully lobbied against public reports on plants

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He said Canada dropped the inspection reports and rankings as part of a host of changes brought in on March 31.

"It was an archaic way of rating plants that was not logical," he said. "Part of the concern was that this information, it was available to the public ... it was indeed causing our members some grief."

Mr. Laws said the industry has always lobbied for Canada to adopt the U.S. standards to avoid having two sets of rules.

The government documents indicate Canada's meat producers were frustrated that they must add more stringent safeguards to their production lines when producing meat for export to the U.S. market.

"Industry would prefer a single set of standards for both the Canadian and American market," states the document prepared by Dr. Richard Arsenault of the CFIA, anticipating what meat council board members would tell CFIA at the meeting. "[The CMC] will also express their frustration about the recent [United States Department of Agriculture] imposition of product testing for *Listeria monocytogenes* and of daily visits in U.S.-eligible meat processing plants."

Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz, who is responsible for the CFIA, hinted this week that Canada might move toward U.S. practices of preventing *Listeria*, such as the pasteurization of packaged meat. But the documents reveal the CFIA lobbied the United States to adopt Canada's rules.

"The CFIA is working at bilateral levels to convince the USDA that its system is equivalent to theirs in order to minimize the need for extra import rules," the document says.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has not backed down from its requirement that all producers of ready-to-eat meat must pasteurize or boil products in the package to kill *Listeria monocytogenes*, add chemicals to prevent the bacteria, or allow more rigorous plant inspections. It was unclear yesterday which option Maple Leaf took to comply with U.S. standards.

However, it does not appear those higher U.S. standards were enough to prevent the current outbreak.

Canadian plants approved to ship to the U.S., which include the Maple Leaf plant in Toronto that was the source of the outbreak, must meet the USDA standards. The CFIA said yesterday that products from that plant are the same regardless of whether they are for Canadian or U.S. consumers.

Paul Mayers, associate vice-president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, acknowledged there is a different standard for Canadian meat plants that aren't approved to ship to the United States.

"There are some additional requirements that may come into play in relation to export certification of products," he said, but insisted all meat in Canada is safe. "We focus on a single level of hygiene and safety for all consumers of products produced in Canada."

MOURNING THE VICTIMS

Family bids farewell



Family members carry Frances Clark's casket yesterday after her funeral in Madoc, Ont., near Belleville. Mrs. Clark, 89, died Monday morning of listeriosis. She had been staying at an Eastern Ontario hospital and a nursing home that were serving lunch meat later recalled by Maple Leaf. JEREMY ASHLEY/THE BELLEVILLE INTELLIGENCER/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The briefing notes were obtained by researcher Ken Rubin through the Access to Information Act and outline Canada's objections to the U.S. rules, which were imposed in response to a deadly *Listeria* outbreak in 1998.

"The CFIA does not agree with this [USDA] approach, and disagrees with a number of specific USDA requirements (e.g., daily visits, finished product testing for *Listeria monocytogenes*), [but] it has implemented the required changes to maintain Canada's access to the important U.S. market. The CFIA will only be successful in convincing the USDA to return to previous arrangements if Canadian operators can demonstrate that they are operating in full compliance with all USDA rules," it states.

In addition, the document indicates the industry successfully lobbied to end inspection reports and rankings of its facilities.

"The [Canadian Meat Council] has sought changes to the existing system because ratings and reports are used by the media through the Access to Information Act ... and there is a misperception that products coming from a 'B' or 'marginally acceptable' facility are less safe."

By the numbers

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Confirmed cases of listeriosis across Canada (22 in Ontario, four in British Columbia, one in Saskatchewan, two in Quebec)

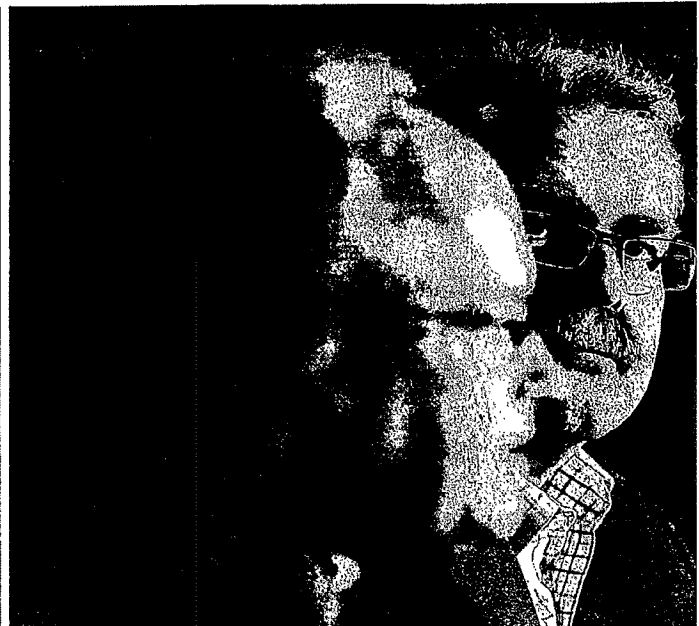
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Deaths associated with the outbreak strain (12 in Ontario, one in British Columbia, one in Saskatchewan, one in Quebec). In eight of these cases, all in Ontario, listeriosis has been identified as the underlying or contributing cause of death. Others are under investigation.

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Suspected cases under investigation (19 in Ontario, one in British Columbia, five in Alberta, one in Manitoba, 10 in Quebec)

Source: Public Health Agency of Canada



Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz, right, attends a news conference about the listeria outbreak in Ottawa yesterday. He is joined by Paul Mayers of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, left, and Dr. Mark Raizenne of Health Canada. SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

LISTERIA OUTBREAK

FOOD SAFETY

Plants exporting to U.S. apply its rules to all meats

Producers that ship south must ensure products meet tougher standards no matter where they're heading, inspection agency says

BY MATTHEW TREVISAN TORONTO
AND BILL CURRY OTTAWA

Canadian meat headed for the United States is subject to more requirements than products remaining in Canada, officials from Maple Leaf, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and the Canadian Meat Council confirmed yesterday. But Paul Mayers, the associate vice-president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, said that

plants approved to ship to the United States use the same practices regardless of where the meat is heading.

"The product it produces for the domestic market is the same as the product it would produce for the export market," he said.

Chapter 11 of the CFIA's *Meat Hygiene Manual of Procedures* lists numerous Canadian plants eligible to export to the United States because they

meet additional requirements, and the Canadian Meat Council said that the number represents most plants in Canada.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture requires Canadian producers of ready-to-eat meat to choose from three broad options: pasteurize or boil products in the package to kill *Listeria monocytogenes*, add anti-microbial agents to prevent the bacteria, or allow more rigorous plant inspec-

tions.

Linda Smith, spokeswoman for Maple Leaf, said all of the company's 23 processing plants in Canada were eligible to export to the United States - including the Toronto plant linked to a nationwide listeria outbreak. But at the time of the outbreak, the plant was not exporting to the United States, she said.

To adhere to U.S. standards, Maple Leaf is required to do

such things as finished-product testing once a month.

Maple Leaf was not immediately able to answer yesterday whether meat from the Toronto plant goes through identical steps regardless of whether it is headed to Canadian or U.S. consumers.

But Bob Kingston, a former CFIA inspector and the Agriculture Union president - which represents CFIA inspectors - said that the treatment

for meats is the same in Maple Leaf plants regardless of where it's going.

Earlier in the day, he released a statement that said processed meats sold in Canada don't require the same level of hands-on oversight by government inspectors as meat exported to the United States.

"These higher standards are required for processing plants to have access to U.S. consumers," he said.