Towards a National Food Safety Strategy

Recommendations
March 21-23 • 2005

National Food Safety Strategy Workshop
March 21-23, 2005

Workshop Recommendations

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The Symposium and Workshop are sponsored by:

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada / Agriculture et Agroalimentaire Canada
Health Canada / Santé Canada
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Canadian Food Inspection Agency / Agence canadienne d'inspection des aliments

Ontario
OFPA Ontario Food Protection Association
University of Guelph
Steritech Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
AGRICORP
CIHR IRSC Canadian Institutes of Health Research / Instituts de recherche en santé du Canada
CRIFS Canadian Research Institute for Food Safety
Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education / Partenariat canadien pour la salubrité des aliments
GFTC Guelph Food Technology Centre

et

Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food Program (ACAAF)

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) is pleased to participate in the production of this publication (or other communication product). AAFC is committed to working with our industry partners to increase public awareness of the importance of the agriculture and agri-food industry to Canada. Opinions expressed in this document are those of (organization) and not necessarily AAFC's.

Acknowledgements

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- **Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food Program (ACAAF)**
- **Agricorp**
- **Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada**
- **Canadian Food Inspection Agency**
- **Canadian Institutes for Health Research**
- **Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education**
- **Canadian Research Institute for Food Safety**
- **Guelph Food Technology Centre**
- **Health Canada**
- **Ontario Food Protection Association**
- **Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs**
- **Public Health Agency of Canada**
- **Steritech**
- **University of Guelph**

The organizing committee would also like to acknowledge the contribution to the meeting of Ken Rounds, Empower KG Training Company and his team of facilitators.

Last, but certainly not least, the organizers would like to thank the participants for the time and effort that they dedicated to making this meeting a success.

Mansel W. Griffiths,
Chair in Dairy Microbiology,
Director, Canadian Research Institute for Food Safety

Background

The two-day Workshop was held on March 22nd-March 23rd, 2005 in which a selected group of participants discussed, in a breakout session setting, topics that could be part of a National Food Safety Strategy. The Workshop was preceded by a one-day Symposium during which presentations outlining the importance of a National Food Safety Strategy from a provincial, national, academic and international perspective were given. This initiative was led by the University of Guelph through the Canadian Research Institute for Food Safety in partnership with Health Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Canadian Institutes for Health Research, the Ontario Food Protection Association, the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education, Steritech, Agricorp and the Guelph Food Technology Centre. Funding was also provided by the Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food program (ACAAF).

The workshop brought together experts in food safety from across Canada to focus on the need for a National Food Safety Strategy. Delegates from consumer organizations, industry, government, academia representing all points along the food chain attended to provide their perspectives and perceived needs. The invited attendance profile[1] was:

- 36% from the Federal Government,
- 33% from Industry, including Industry Associations,
- 19% from Academia,
- 12% from Provincial Governments.
- 81% from Ontario
- 4% from Manitoba
- 3.5% from QuÈbec
- 3.5% from British Columbia
- 2.5% from Alberta
- 2.5% from Nova Scotia
- 2% from Saskatchewan
- 1% from outside Canada

In addition, a number of international experts in food safety were invited to provide a global perspective on food safety problems and solutions.

The workshop focused on various aspects of food safety including:

- Food safety research
- Surveillance of zoonotic and foodborne illness and of food hazards
- Food safety policy
- Food inspection (including discussions on standards and HACCP)
- Food safety training

Breakout groups, consisting of a balanced representation from the stakeholder groups present, engaged in facilitated discussions on each of the topics identified above.

Discussions focused on:

- How to better integrate and harmonize food safety activities across Canada.
- Best practices for each of the topics, and challenges to the implementation of those practices.
- Ways to improve communication among stakeholders.
- Areas that could benefit from integrated priority setting.
- How to integrate performance measurement among stakeholders.

[1] The list of attendees is attached as Appendix 1

More specifically each breakout group was asked to consider the following questions in their deliberations:

- Consider what is working well (best practices) and how we know it's working well (performance measurements).
- Identify opportunities where we have unmet needs as they relate to achieving better communication, harmonization and integration of the food safety activities across Canada.
- Undertake a root cause analysis process to define the primary reasons as to why the unmet need exists. The critical root causes form the basis for recommendations.
- Develop recommendations to address the unmet need(s). Determine potential barriers to implementation of these recommendations and possible strategies to overcome these barriers.

Overall the participants identified a number of key themes that require further consideration by governments and other interested parties. These themes are:

- The need for a single national lead agency for food safety to improve coordination and facilitate the efficient use of resources.
- The need to determine food safety priorities for Canada as a whole.
- The requirement for coordinated and sustainable national funding for food safety activities.
- The need to increase collaboration in attaining and integrating data gathered through research, surveillance and inspection.
- The need to better communicate the cost-benefit of food safety surveillance, inspection, training, education and research activities for the health of Canadians and the economic well-being of the country.
- The need for a risk-based approach to food safety surveillance, inspection and policy development.
- The need to increase transparency and inclusiveness in food safety policy development.
- The need to develop effective training tools and evaluation systems.

The following report provides an overview of the discussions on each of the topics. A number of common themes emerged during the discussions and these could be grouped into three main streams:

Improved communication and information sharing.

Improved coordination and collaboration.

Improved strategic planning and performance measurement.

The report also includes the specific recommendations put forward by the participants.



1. Improved communication and information sharing

Agreement on the need for a policy should be based on input from all stakeholders. There is not enough opportunity for government (policy makers) and industry, academia and consumers (implementers or those who benefit) to interact on food safety policy issues before the development of said policy. When it comes to government consultation with industry, all the appropriate players are not always identified. Stakeholder lists are often not updated. In addition, there are frequently different interpretations about who will be impacted by a policy; leading to different views about who is a stakeholder.

A specific recommendation brought forward to help improve the consultative process was the following:

- Government (federal/provincial/territorial/municipal) should develop an initial ìstandard listî of groups that would represent stakeholders on food safety issues. These groups, including consumer, industry and other organizations, would, in turn, be accountable for the circulation of the appropriate information within their organizations. This would then allow individuals to 'self-identify' to be part of the process.

Recommendation 1.1: Develop and implement, as appropriate, a protocol for policy development that improves transparency and inclusiveness.

It was also noted that, currently, there is no comprehensive, single research database with sustainable funding to keep research information current. A complete and current single database was identified as a critical tool to allow for the following:

- Improve research interpretation for decision making.
- Avoid duplication which, in turn, would increase the availability of funds for research.
- Allow identification of potential synergies and promote team building.
- Improve research priority setting.
- Create a mechanism for analyzing research outputs.
- Help the research community to respond, in real time, with research to address immediate problems.

It was proposed that the Council of Agri-Food Science and Technology (CAST) in the U.S. act as a potential model to be explored.

Recommendation 1.2: Explore the option of building a national food safety research database containing researchers, projects, areas of research, results and available funding sources (a one-stop shop for research information).

Participants also recognized that funding organizations, the general public, and other parties are often not aware of the value of food safety research and the relevance of the results produced. It was therefore identified that a communications program should:

Identify potential barriers to communication and approaches to overcoming them that are relevant to the targeted audience.

- Identify national targets for food safety that would support communications.
- Develop and use consistent and clear messages.
- Articulate the importance and value-for-money of the food safety research undertaken in Canada.

Recommendation 1.3: Develop and implement, as appropriate, a communication plan for food safety research.

In a climate based on increasing global linkages and scarce resources, collaboration is a key element that must be encouraged and rewarded. To that end, a first step would be to create a collaborative research strategy, where incentives for collaboration, partnership and joint reporting are a corner stone. In addition, clear performance measures should be built in to help evaluation.

Recommendation 1.4: Develop a strategy for collaboration and sharing in research.

2. Improved coordination and collaboration

Currently, there is no single central body with the authority and funding to coordinate and facilitate food safety research and risk assessment activities. In addition, there is often a lack of continuity in leadership and direction among the various stakeholders. This has created a problem for sustainability of, and commitment to, funding for food safety research and risk assessment within Canada. Therefore, there is a need for a national mechanism to set national priorities and to allow rapid response to emerging issues.

Recommendation 2.1: Consider the creation of an independent national food authority with funding to coordinate priority setting and facilitate research and risk assessment activities.

The participants also clearly identified the need to improve food and health surveillance. It was noted, for instance, that food-borne illness data is incomplete for certain provinces/ territories and food consumption data need updating by age and population groups. Participants identified the following elements as key hurdles in moving towards more complete and accurate data:

- differences in legal requirements in the various jurisdictions regarding the privacy of personal and third party information and definitions of notifiable diseases;
- lack of long-term, sustainable funding for surveillance;
- geographic disparities and population diversity which drive the high cost for data collection;
- poor assessment of the ìhuman burden of illnessî, including a lack of data on incidence, prevalence, severity of illness and associated costs to society;
- inadequate trace back to sources of exposure such as environment (rural, water, wildlife, processing), food or domestic animals;
- the passiveness of the current surveillance system results in lost information;
- chronic under reporting leading to low rates of investigation;

Participants agreed that an integrated approach to food and health surveillance is needed to strengthen the existing system in place, and this would need to include the Canada Foodborne Illness Outbreak Response Protocol (FIORP).

Recommendation 2.2: Consider the creation of a national, integrated, risk-based food and health surveillance system.

Recommendation 2.3: Improve the collection of surveillance data.

The adoption of ***Recommendation 2.3*** would require examination of consumers' willingness to share medical information related to foodborne diseases/illness. One approach would be to conduct a Public Involvement Network (PIN) survey through the Consumers' Council of Canada, or other relevant organization, to determine consumer reaction to the proposal. At the same time, it would be necessary to explore with various governments the options to protect privacy while obtaining required personal information when investigating food borne illnesses.

Surveillance could be enhanced by using sentinel sites across the country that encompass representative groups of Canadians. Similar systems have been adopted in many countries, including the United States. It would also be an advantage if data could be captured from private laboratories. Initially a regional pilot program could be instigated to allow proactive risk

identification. This pilot would employ front-line health care professionals to collect food borne illness data, which would serve as an appropriate baseline. These data would then be coordinated with other relevant data; such as animal health, food consumption etc.).

Canada does not currently have a national risk-based inspection system. Some of the reasons for this are:

- the influence of trade requirements to maintain the status quo for inspection;
- the lack of data/science to support and defend a change in the inspection system (to prove that a risk-based system meets the needs of other countries);
- the lack of high profile food safety issues to drive implementation of equivalent inspection systems across the food continuum;
- the diversity of food industry sectors and the limited financial ability to enhance food safety in their operations.

To help create both the willingness to move to a risk-based system, and the design for such a system, the following actions were recommended:

- Collect and share current data available within both industry and government to support the development of a risk based inspection model. It was suggested that the inspection system adopted by Le ministre de l'Agriculture, des PLcheries et de l'Alimentation du QuÈbec (MAPAQ) could serve as a reference.
- Pursue within specific commodities (eg. poultry, pork), pilot studies of inspection reform activities that are risk based.
- Expedite the development of a methodology/system to share existing inspection data among food safety agencies.
- Advocate industry-initiated participation, supported by government, utilizing partnerships that already exist among stakeholders.

The current inspection system does not utilize the information gathered to determine what is really causing diseases, and the affiliated real and perceived food safety risks. There is a lack of uniform application of HACCP systems that include an inspection system that continually monitors and provides opportunities for improvement within the food system. To help create an inspection system that identifies root causes, there is a need to correlate inspection data on food products with human food borne illness data.

Recommendation 2.4: Explore the development of a risk-based national inspection system across the food continuum that provides opportunities for improvement across the entire value chain.

3. Improved strategic planning and performance measurement.

Working groups across all the areas discussed, i.e. policy, research, surveillance, training and inspection, indicated the need for a national food safety strategy that would provide focus, identify national risk-based priorities and lay the foundation for collaborative work among the stakeholders. This would be accompanied by a performance framework that would require governments to report back to Canadians on the impact that these activities have had on improving public health.

Core leadership (the accountable body) and decision-making on priorities and funding should be determined through agreement by the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Agriculture and Health Ministers. A national food policy framework could be used as a mechanism to reach this agreement.

Recommendation 3.1: Create a long term, proactive, risk-based surveillance program along the food chain continuum (see also Recommendation 2.2).

Recommendation 3.2: Consider holding a symposium on national targets including standardization of methodology by discipline e.g. chemistry, microbiology etc. as soon as practical.

Emerging and expanding food importation into Canada, the sovereignty (independence) of food producing countries and the lack of willingness to communicate with global partners, may be increasing risks to Canadian food safety from external sources. The impacts of driving forces such as industry stakeholder wealth and changing consumer preferences are not well known. Participants highlighted the need for a project which would evaluate how these driving forces impact food safety risks to our food system. The way forward could include a meeting of international experts as well as a study to gain a better understanding of other countries' regulatory environments and compare that to what is actually happening on the ground.

Recommendation 3.3: Undertake a research initiative to gain an understanding of the global driving forces that will impact Canadian food safety.

Training is an important tool to help prevent food safety problems from occurring and should be considered as a priority alongside other food safety issues. However, the responsibility for food safety training lies with a variety of players, including industry and the various provincial and territorial governments. In that context, several breakout groups identified the need for a strategic direction for food safety training and education to help improve the overall results.

Recommendation 3.4: Develop a national outcome-based food safety training and education strategy.

Finally, it was noted that there is a lack of evidence linking food safety education and training programs to improved safe food handling behavior on the job and, ultimately to improved public health outcomes. This gap was attributed to:

- the limited resources available;
- the lack of incentive and motivation to evaluate food safety training/education programs;
- the apparent systemic low level of interest in food safety education;
- the absence of commitment to, and ownership of, the evaluation function;
- the lack of effective measurement tools to determine the success of training/education programs;
- the "bias of optimism" stemming from the absence of serious outbreaks.

Recommendation 3.5: Develop, validate and apply tools to measure the success/ effectiveness of food safety training and education programs to show the value they have in achieving food safety goals.

Next Steps

The summary of the outcome of the Workshop will be sent out to workshop participants and to key stakeholders and government departments and agencies for consideration in the development of their respective priority setting and policy development exercises. Funding will be sought to develop the recommendations that are achievable in a relatively short time frame.

June 24, 2005

APPENDIX 1 – WORKSHOP ATTENDEES

Baker, Tom; Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food
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Boag, Lynn; Public Health Agency of Canada
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Candelaria, Annabella; Sargent Farms
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Chuckman, Debbie; Cara Operations Ltd
Coles, Anthony; Public Health Agency of Canada
Copeland, Larry; BC Centre for Disease Control
Costea, Thomas; Canadian Food Inspection Agency
Crichton, Jackie; Loblaw Companies Limited - Ontario
Delaquis, Pascal; Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
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Ellis, Andrea; Public Health Agency of Canada
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Giguere, Lucile; MAPAQ
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Schraft, Heidi; Lakehead University
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