



# Putting Canada First

AN ARCHITECTURE FOR AGRICULTURAL  
POLICY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

FOOD SAFETY HAS ALWAYS BEEN IMPORTANT  
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## Food Safety and Food Quality

**T**he Government of Canada and the provincial and territorial governments are working with the agriculture and agri-food industry and interested Canadians to develop an architecture for agricultural policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The objective is for Canada to be the world leader in food safety, innovation and environmentally-responsible production.

To realize this vision, governments have agreed in principle on an action plan for an agricultural policy framework composed of five elements: food safety and food quality, environment, science and innovation, renewal, and business risk management. The framework, which is based on the setting of common goals for each element, entails important benefits for the sector and ultimately the general public.

Accordingly, governments have launched a national dialogue about the policy direction with stakeholders and interested Canadians to develop the proposed policy approach. This **consultation** document is one of a series of publications dedicated to that end. To obtain additional information and contribute to this important dialogue, visit [www.agr.gc.ca/puttingcanadafirst](http://www.agr.gc.ca/puttingcanadafirst) or call 1 800 O-Canada (1 800 622-6232).

## Consumers are raising the bar for food safety and quality

Food safety has always been important to consumers, but recent high-profile events around the world, including outbreaks of mad cow disease in Europe, and concerns about bio-terrorism have raised their awareness and expectations. In addition, in areas other than safety, consumers are increasingly knowledgeable and discerning in their food purchases and are demanding greater choice.

To maintain their markets, suppliers of food and agricultural products are developing and implementing systems that demonstrate to both existing and potential consumers that they can deliver products within the demanded safety and quality specifications. At the same time, suppliers are taking advantage of these changing consumer dynamics to gain new markets and develop niche markets with potential price premiums. The proposed Agricultural Policy Framework (APF) aims to build on these efforts and help all producers to take similar steps and solidify Canada's reputation as a producer of safe, high-quality food. In working on these areas, it is critical to also look at the implications for other issues of concern to industry and consumers, such as regulatory harmonization within Canada and with key trading partners.

"Governments have made significant efforts focussed beyond the farm gate (e.g. food processing, etc.), but now must take additional steps to better integrate farms into the food safety continuum with the enhancement and accelerated implementation of on-farm food safety systems."

*Federal–Provincial–Territorial Ministers of Agriculture Agreement in Principle on an Action Plan for an Agricultural Policy Framework, June 2001*

## Food safety systems are being strengthened

Until recently, efforts to improve food safety systems have primarily been at the processing level. For example, the processing industry

has worked during the past decade to implement Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP), a control and monitoring system that stresses prevention and correction of potential problems at each step of the manufacturing process.

The HACCP approach complements traditional methods of food safety inspection, and it is quickly becoming the norm. Due to pressure from consumers for better safety and quality assurance, the use of HACCP and similar models is spreading throughout the food production and processing chain, all the way to the farm level.

The industry has been working proactively to develop national, voluntary, HACCP-based food safety programs for use on farms with financial support from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the technical support from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Seventeen industry groups are developing plans that cover most of the major commodities, including livestock, poultry, horticulture and field crops. These actions, taken largely in response to customer demands, hold the potential to open new markets.

While the adoption of food safety systems on farms can be time-consuming, and technically challenging to implement, governments could ease these difficulties. Assistance from governments in this area, such as oversight and coordination, would promote the rapid adoption of food safety programs on farms across the country.

"To be the world leader, Ministers agree that Canada must ... build on Canada's reputation as a producer of safe, high-quality food products, by strengthening on-farm food safety systems and working to secure their international recognition, ..."

*Federal–Provincial–Territorial Ministers of Agriculture Agreement in Principle on an Action Plan for an Agricultural Policy Framework, June 2001*

All activities of the food production and processing chain are interrelated. All parts of the continuum, therefore, need to have food safety systems in place in order to have a seamless, country-wide assurance system. Such a system is required to get the maximum benefit from these programs in international markets.



### The role of governments in food safety

All orders of government in Canada have a role in food safety. Health Canada sets policies and standards for the safety and nutritional quality of food sold in Canada. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency enforces these standards, and sets and enforces standards for animal health and plant protection. At the provincial and territorial level, health, agriculture and other ministries enact food safety laws that apply to food produced and sold exclusively within the borders of their province or territory.

The Government of Canada, working with the provinces and territories, has agreed to officially recognize the administrative effectiveness and technical soundness of on-farm food safety programs, including the requirement to meet regulatory standards. This recognition will help foreign governments, buyers and consumers accept industry-led food safety programs on Canadian farms. This, in turn, could mean expanded markets for Canadian products.

## Quality assurance programs are also on the rise

In addition to food safety assurance, there is a growing market demand for the development of quality assurance systems to help industry secure new markets for agricultural products. Although industry must take the lead in implementing these systems, government could help maximize their acceptance in global markets through oversight and official recognition of these programs.

## Tracking and tracing provide safety and quality benefits

Outbreaks of diseases or pathogens within the food production and processing chain were once contained within small areas. Intensive farming and the increased movement of goods and people,

however, have made them much more difficult to contain. As a result, outbreaks—whether from natural causes or bio-terrorism—can spread throughout a country and around the world in a remarkably short time.

Further complicating matters is the fact that as a product moves through the production and processing chain and beyond, its source becomes less and less defined. In a situation where there is an outbreak, a large quantity of the commodity must be removed from the market to offset the risk that some of the affected product would be missed.

“Ministers also acknowledge the importance of moving forward with identity preservation systems to track and trace products throughout the food chain.”

*Federal–Provincial–Territorial Ministers of Agriculture Agreement in Principle on an Action Plan for an Agricultural Policy Framework, June 2001*

The further development of tracking and tracing systems could help solve this problem. These systems preserve the identity of a product as it moves through the food production and processing chain on a commodity-by-commodity basis. This information could be used to remove suspect products from the market quickly and effectively.

The benefits of these systems also extend beyond disease surveillance of animal populations or identifying contaminated batches of food products. The identity preservation feature of tracking and tracing also contributes to quality assurance programs, which industry could use to maintain existing markets and capture niche markets for premium products.

To be effective, however, tracking and tracing systems must be applied consistently and nation-wide, and work throughout the entire chain from producer to consumer. At present, these systems are at different stages of development across commodities and across the country. Government could help the development of such systems throughout the sector with research, coordination and oversight.



### Tracking and tracing is a marketing advantage

The benefits of tracking and tracing are evident in the case of seed potatoes, where the ability to track production right through to final destination has allowed Canada to both manage disease problems and to access markets that demand quality assurance.

## An approach to enhanced food safety and food quality

“Ministers commit to a vision of Canada as the best country in the world in terms of on-farm food safety. This vision is only attainable if we have comprehensive, cost-effective, and consistent implementation all across Canada.”

*Federal–Provincial–Territorial Ministers of Agriculture Agreement in Principle on an Action Plan for an Agricultural Policy Framework, June 2001*

To promote comprehensive and consistent implementation of food safety and quality assurance programs across Canada, the Ministers of Agriculture have committed to work together and with industry towards a set of common goals. Among the common goals being considered are:

- to protect human health by reducing exposure to food-borne hazards;
- to increase consumer confidence in the safety and quality of foods sold in Canada and/or exported;
- to improve ability to identify and respond to food safety issues and concerns;
- to increase ability to meet or exceed market requirements for food safety and quality;
- to support harmonized legislation and regulation to promote market access for domestic and export markets; and

- to provide value-added opportunities through the adoption of food safety and food quality systems.

To further encourage consistent implementation and to achieve these common goals, the following is being considered:

- to adopt food safety and food quality assurance systems, based upon HACCP principles, throughout the food continuum;
- to share critical food safety and surveillance information between all levels of government; and
- to implement comprehensive tracking and tracing systems throughout the food production and processing chain to meet public protection, consumer preference and commercial requirements.

## Conclusion

Putting the Canadian agriculture and agri-food sector first requires a national vision and a national partnership. Governments and industry moving forward collectively to integrate all elements of the proposed APF would enable us to brand Canada as the world leader in:

- the production of safe food in an environmentally-responsible manner;
- meeting and exceeding diverse market specifications for quality; and
- innovation throughout the agri-food value chain so that investors and customers can be confident in Canada's ability to succeed today and into the future.

Branding Canada as the world leader in these areas will contribute to the continued growth and increased prosperity of the Canadian agriculture and agri-food sector by capturing new markets and customers.

To learn more about this Federal-Provincial-Territorial initiative, contact: [www.agr.gc.ca/puttingcanadafirst](http://www.agr.gc.ca/puttingcanadafirst) or 1 800 O-Canada (1 800 622-6232).