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Listeriosis funding to be cut *Agriculture Union asks food industry to object*

Ottawa (January 16, 2011) The federal government has quietly announced plans to cancel important food safety initiatives put in place to shore up a weak inspection system and to address a chronic shortage of inspectors after the Maple Leaf Foods listeriosis outbreak killed 23 Canadians in 2008.

The CFIA's latest plan declares that "resources will sunset for Listeriosis, and for increased frequency of food inspection in meat processing establishments" in 2013-14. This plan comes to light amid news that the CFIA is embarking on an extensive review of its regulations to make them more friendly to industry.

"This looks like an exercise to make regulation cheaper, not safer or smarter. Ottawa should worry about undermining public confidence with food safety cuts because that will be bad for the industry," said Bob Kingston, President of the Agriculture Union – PSAC, which represents federal food safety inspectors.

The Agency's *2011-12 Estimates Report on Plans and Priorities* forecasts a smaller CFIA by 2013-14 with \$21.5 million less funding than current levels and 234 fewer staff.

The CFIA's Food Safety Program will bear the overwhelming burden of these cuts -- \$21.1 million and 207 fewer food safety staff – even though food safety represents less than half of overall spending by the CFIA and 46% of its total staff.

At a news conference in Ottawa today, Kingston was joined by Karen Clark, whose mother Francis died in 2008 from listeriosis after eating tainted cold cuts.

"It scares me, quite honestly, to see the federal government's attitude. It looks like they think Canadians have forgotten about the listeriosis outbreak and all the people it affected. That they can reduce these inspectors and safety programs and no one will notice. Something terrible happened to me and my family. We're not special. If the federal government does not maintain adequate safety oversight and inspection it could happen again to anyone's family," Clark said.

“Cuts of this magnitude would leave the food safety program reeling and severely diminish an inspector’s ability to complete assignments, and that means risk of another major food borne illness outbreak will be elevated,” said Kingston.

At best, this decision sends the wrong message that everything is fine in Canada’s food safety system. At worst, these cuts could unravel important improvements to Canada’s food safety oversight made over the past few years and potentially threaten access to US markets for Canadian producers.

The CFIA’s move to increase the frequency of its inspections was made in direct response to US regulators who demanded that Ottawa station inspectors in slaughter and meat processing facilities every 12 hour shift in order to meet more stringent US requirements.

“US regulators pushed the government of Canada to increase the presence of food safety inspectors in plants producing for export to the US. Ottawa’s current plans to cut funding the CFIA needs to meet US inspection requirements will send warning signals to regulators south of the border,” Kingston said.

Like other government agencies and departments the CFIA is facing up to a 10% cut to its budget as part of the federal government’s strategic and operating review. This could translate to an additional cut of \$74 million.

“If Ottawa proceeds with the cuts it has already announced, plus another 10%, the federal government will be playing roulette with the health of Canadians. Producers and processors should be up in arms about these cuts. We hope they will join us in urging Ottawa to re-consider,” Kingston said.

The Agriculture Union announced that it is launching a campaign to recruit major players in Canada’s food industry to oppose these cuts, starting with Maple Leaf Foods. The online campaign at www.foodsafetyfirst.ca features an action centre anyone can use to send a message to food industry leaders urging them to get on board.

“To begin, we will be inviting our supporters to urge Michael McCain to tell Ottawa to re-consider these cuts. Maple Leaf Foods is symbolic of a failed food safety system. Their company suffered tremendous reputational and economic damage when the food safety system failed Canadians,” Kingston said.

The campaign will also reach out to other Canadian food producers and manufacturers.

“We hope Stephen Harper will listen to industry even if he won’t listen to the concerns of ordinary Canadians who are worried about the safety of their food,” Kingston said.