



Speaking Notes

Canadian Food Inspection Agency cuts sink consumer protection against food fraud in Metro Vancouver

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Check Against Delivery

Good morning and thanks for coming out.

We have invited you here to discuss an important cut to consumer protection recently made by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

My name is Bob Kingston and I am the President of the Agriculture Union.

We represent federal food inspectors, including those who work here in Metro Vancouver in the now disbanded Consumer Protection Unit.

I myself have been a 25-year inspector, including 15 years as an inspection supervisor.

Joining me this morning is Bob Jackson. Bob is the PSAC Regional Vice-President for BC. Bob has worked at the CFIA for over thirty years.

We are both currently on leave from the Agency.

Metro Vancouver is now the only major metropolitan centre in Canada without a group of food inspectors dedicated to protecting consumers from food fraud.

As of the end of January, the Consumer Protection Unit here was disbanded.

Today, the remaining consumer protection inspectors -- fewer than half of the original compliment -- have been embedded in other CFIA teams.

Without leadership and co-ordination and under pressure to address other priorities, work to protect consumers in Metro Vancouver from food fraud is being moved to the sidelines.

For example, a much reduced consumer protection workplan has been established for this year. In 2014, there will be:

- 60% fewer ground meat inspections than there were in 2013. This means there will be less checking of fat content, filler and fraudulent species claims. It is not uncommon for some companies to mix pork or other species with their beef.
- No oil inspections, even though oil adulteration has been a big problem. Olive oil is often cut with less expensive oils, or extra virgin olive oil cut with regular olive oil or pumice olive oil.
- Less than half of the independent food retailers inspected in 2013 will be inspected this year.

In 2014, the CFIA will continue to ignore consumer fraud in restaurants. Menus will not be routinely checked as they once were for product substitution, misrepresentations and short measure.

Looking back, the Metro Vancouver Consumer Protection inspectorate has been allowed to wither from 11 when the program was first established in the mid-1990s to just 4 inspectors today.

Elsewhere in BC, Victoria and Kelowna have two consumer protection inspectors each, down from three in each city when the program first came on stream.

With fewer inspectors, even this reduced plan to prevent consumer fraud and food safety problems will likely be impossible to complete.

These inspectors play a very important role.

They watch for fraudulent claims; products that claim to be organic when they are not, for example. They check for fraudulent product weights and monitor misleading product descriptions.

Until recently, they also checked for unsafe product temperatures in food stores.

Because of diminishing budgets the Agency ordered its consumer protection inspectors to stop this practice.

This is a food safety concern. Product temperatures in display cabinets that are either too high or not low enough can create the risk of food borne illness.

Labels on all of the sample products on the table here make various claims about what's inside the wrapper.

Not all, but some companies have misled or outright lied to consumers about their products.

How are consumers supposed to know if this bread is organic, as it claims to be? Or, if this bottle of oil is in fact extra virgin olive oil?

They can't know unless we are checking and, increasingly, we are not.

[Bob Jackson]

What is driving these decisions?

The simple answer is cuts to the CFIA's budget.

According to the latest federal government forecast, Ottawa plans to cut the CFIA's food safety program by \$35 million and 192 food safety positions by 2016/17.

The entire food safety program will be affected, but the brunt of the cuts will be made to meat and poultry inspection.

Check your kits for background on these plans.

Responsibility for inspecting and enforcing laws and regulations related to consumer fraud in food products rests with Canada's food inspection agency, the CFIA.

Yet, the agency has a very poor track record when it comes to enforcing the rules or even notifying consumers and retailers when the agency knows they have been broken.

CFIA is choosing to ignore blatant examples of misleading or fraudulent product claims. The record shows that consumers need protection from some companies who resort to fraudulent and misleading practices. Rather than dismantling its Consumer Protection Unit, the government should be prosecuting companies that defraud consumers.

[Kingston]

Inspectors who belong to these units care deeply about the work they do protecting consumers from fraudulent claims and potential threats to safety. They push CFIA executives to enforce the rules and prosecute violators.

We have already reached the bare minimum of inspection to protect consumers from food fraud and worse. These cuts take us over that line.

We'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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