



## Spotlight on Food Safety

If there was one issue that was impossible to avoid during the federal election, it was food safety. Twenty people died and many others were made sick after a Maple Leaf meat processing machine became contaminated with listeriosis bacteria. This prompted a public outcry over the deregulation of meat inspection. Hundreds of newspaper articles and letters to the editor wanted to know how the growing trend toward industry self-policing contributed to the outbreak.

PSAC was front and center during this debate, underlining the connection between quality public services and food safety. Bob Kingston, President of the Agriculture Union and Patty Ducharme, PSAC's National Executive Vice-President led the call for Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz to resign and for new, stronger inspection guidelines to be put in place.

context of a broader government move toward deregulation of food inspection – one that puts public health at risk.

The federal government introduced changes affecting meat inspection earlier this year. As of March 31, 2008, government inspectors spend less time on direct, hands-on inspection of



Mom...  
can I  
have a  
snack?



## What happened?

As the listeriosis crisis was in full swing, the first thing the public wanted to know was why it happened. If you believe industry spokespersons and high level government officials the answer is simple: a bacteria outbreak in one hard-to-clean part of a meat slicing machine led to the contamination of a series of Maple Leaf meat products. Though devastating, the outbreak represented a tragic accident, they say.

But according to Kingston and the food inspectors he represents, there is a lot more to the story than the federal government would like to admit. In dozens of media interviews over the last few weeks, Kingston argued that the listeriosis outbreak occurred within the

If you worry about the safety of the  
food on your table, take action at  
[www.foodsafetyfirst.ca](http://www.foodsafetyfirst.ca)

meat processing and products and more time reviewing reports and test results that companies produce.

Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz tried to reassure worried Canadians, repeating that government inspectors split their time evenly between direct inspection activities and paperwork. He also said that that 200 new inspectors have been hired.

But these claims have been vigorously disputed by inspectors who say the new system forces them to spend 75 per cent of their time reviewing paperwork and that no new meat inspectors have been hired.

## Avoiding questions

A recent Toronto Star/CBC report stated that in April the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) quietly dropped its requirement that food producers report positive bacterial tests to government inspectors. Four months later, people began to die from listeriosis linked to Maple Leaf's Toronto plant.

During the federal election, Prime Minister Harper promised to launch an investigation into the tainted meat scandal. He has yet to do so, and critics say this was only an attempt to avoid questions and assuage fear about food safety during the election.

Government food inspectors are front line witnesses to the shift from independent government supervision of the safety of Canada's food production to industry self-policing.

And now, tragically, Canadians are seeing the consequences of Ottawa's steady cuts to food safety funding, which have undermined the authority of food inspectors and put the public at risk.



including at Maple Leaf Foods in Toronto, meat inspectors now spend only 25 per cent of their time directly supervising from the plant floor, with the rest of their time spent reviewing company-generated reports.

Beyond meat processing, industry self-policing has been extended to poultry; monitoring the health of birds was transferred from inspectors

## Our demands:

PSAC and the Agriculture Union are demanding that the federal government take action now to protect food safety by:

- **Hiring 1,000 additional inspectors and veterinarians to improve compliance.** There are almost 800 federally regulated meat processing facilities scattered across Canada, many processing thousands of animals every day. There are also thousands of cheese, produce and other food production facilities, as well as delis and other retail outlets, all of which are potential sources for deadly food-borne bacteria. This territory is far too vast for the 1,100 fully qualified process food inspectors and 230 meat hygiene veterinarians currently on staff. While the problem of food-borne illness is complex, one dimension of the problem is clear: our food inspectors are too few and thinly spread.
  - **Placing an immediate moratorium on industry self-policing policies.** Under changes introduced on March 31,
- to the private sector in the fall of 2007. Plans that the Conservative government has approved but has not yet entirely implemented will give industry more self-policing powers when it comes to safety. The Compliance Verification System, the Poultry Rejection Program and future self-policing plans should be put on hold.
- **Removing obstacles that prevent CFIA inspectors and vets from taking immediate action.** CFIA inspectors are discouraged from taking immediate action when serious health problems arise. Instead, they are strongly encouraged to give the offending company a "Corrective Action Request" which states the nature of the problem and gives the company up to 60 days to address it.
  - **Restore the system of public audit reports which were cancelled under pressure from the meat industry.** For 20 years, government inspectors reported and ranked the meat processing facilities they inspected. Under

pressure from an industry lobby group called the Canadian Meat Council, the federal government cancelled the practice soon after Stephen Harper took office in 2006. Canadians need to know which companies are meeting safety standards and which companies are not. The public audit system should be restored.

## Take Action: Put Food Safety First

In response to the listeriosis crisis, PSAC and the Agriculture Union launched an action website: Food Safety First ([www.foodsafetyfirst.ca](http://www.foodsafetyfirst.ca)). The site provided a one-stop place for people to learn more about the connection between the tainted meat crisis and the deregulation of food inspection. It also allowed voters to contact their candidates and demand that they take action.

Now, the Food Safety First website is where you can email your newly-elected Member of Parliament. The federal government has been cutting food safety programs and shifting responsibility for safety to the food companies themselves. Companies might want to police themselves when it comes to safety, but the Maple Leaf tainted food tragedy is a classic example of what can happen.

For safer food for you and your family, please send a message to your MP today. Ask your MP to take the Commitment for Food Safety if they want to ensure your support.

**Stand up for food safety and quality public services. Visit [foodsafetyfirst.ca](http://foodsafetyfirst.ca) today.**

# NewsRelease



Public Service Alliance of Canada | Representing 160,000 workers

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**October 6, 2008**

## Maple Leaf and CFIA withhold key information

Ottawa – Unanswered questions about the origins of the Maple Leaf listeriosis outbreak and CFIA regulation that handcuffs food inspectors means a repeat of the food-borne illness is likely, according to the Agriculture Union – PSAC, which represents Canada’s food inspectors.

“Food inspectors should be notified when test results for listeria and other bacteria in meat processing plants are positive. This requirement, which was cancelled by CFIA, should be restored immediately, and CFIA should invest the resources to ensure inspectors monitor clean-ups after positive tests,” says Agriculture Union president Bob Kingston.

Elimination of the requirement to notify food inspectors when environmental tests at Maple Leaf and other processing plants find bacteria raises several troubling questions about what happened and when, at Maple Leaf’s Toronto facility which was the source of listeria-tainted product:

1. When did Maple Leaf testing first produce a positive result for listeria?
2. How many tests produced positive results before CFIA was notified?
3. How many failed clean-up efforts were conducted by Maple Leaf before CFIA was notified?
4. How much product was produced and shipped after the first positive test and before CFIA was notified?
5. How much time elapsed after the first positive test before the public was notified of a product recall?

“Until we know the answers to these questions, reporting requirements are restored and the CFIA invests resources to adequately monitor plant clean-up following the discovery of bacterial contamination, inspectors will remain concerned for public safety,” Kingston said.

“Twenty people are dead and no one is being held accountable. Are other meat processing plants in Canada getting positive test results for other deadly bacteria without notifying the CFIA? Until Maple Leaf and CFIA answer these questions and deal with these issues, inspectors are concerned that the same thing could happen again, and Canadians should continue to be concerned as well,” says Kingston.

[www.psac-afpc.com](http://www.psac-afpc.com)

# Wear your PSAC pride on your sleeve

Make a statement with standard or customized, high quality apparel bearing the PSAC logo. Hats, t-shirts, vests and more are all available from the PSAC boutique. They're great for mobilizing and outreach campaigns and for everyday, casual wear.

Show your union pride and order promotional apparel from the PSAC catalogue.

## PSAC Promotional Program Catalogue Catalogue du programme promotionnel de l'AFPC

