



Happy birthday **CFIA**

Ron Doering

The 20th anniversary of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) seems to have gone by unnoticed, even by the CFIA. Has it lived up to the original vision? Has it achieved its promise from 20 years ago?

Of course I'm not an unbiased observer. In April 1995 I was given the lead responsibility to carry out the consultation on how Canada should reorganize its food inspection and related activities. I put together the team to carry out the review. We called ourselves the Office of Food Inspection Systems (OFIS). When we completed the consultation, we recommended the most ambitious of the options reviewed — that the government should create a new independent legislated agency with the full regulatory authority for the whole food chain. Our minister, Ralph Goodale, went to Cabinet in the late fall of 1995 and the Chrétien government adopted our recommendation. OFIS was also given the lead to set it up, and we got the historic legislation through in time to open the doors on April 1, 1997. Later I served as its president until I retired from the public service.

Looking back on the original OFIS documents, the CFIA was created to meet five broad objectives. How well have these been met?

1. Enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of federal food inspection and related services. The CFIA clearly met this goal, saving \$44 million. Overlap and duplication was reduced. Sixteen programs that had formerly been delivered by four different departments were brought

under one roof. Consumers and industry now have one point of contact.

2. Provide integrated governance of food safety, plant health and animal health. This was fully achieved. We are still the only jurisdiction in the world that brings the whole food chain together under one agency: feed, seeds, fertilizer, all food including fish, as well as animal and plant health. The value of this integration has been widely recognized. For example, Canada managed the challenge of BSE better than most countries because senior officials in charge of animal health were also in charge of food safety. This integration also accounts for our fully integrated investigation and recall system led by the widely respected Office of Food Safety and Recall (OFSR). Canadians now take this single point of contact for granted. Remember, for example, that in the U.S. it is still the case that a vegetarian pizza is the responsibility of FDA, but a pepperoni pizza falls under the jurisdiction of the USDA.

3. Enhance international market access. The CFIA has harmonized technical trade areas, negotiated many international equivalency agreements, challenged misuse of technical measures, and played a major role in influencing international standards. Former OFIS member and later CFIA vice-president Peter Brackenridge has noted that “with the changing international trade environment, a single organization like the CFIA is well placed to manage the challenge of protectionism by the misuse of technical standards.”

4. Enhance provincial and federal regulatory harmonization. Former OFIS

member and later CFIA vice-president Cam Prince notes that this is one area where progress has not met our original expectations. This issue may take on increased impetus in light of the recently announced Canadian Free Trade Agreement, but there continues to be major international trade law barriers to full intergovernmental harmonization.

5. Modernize Canadian Food Law. In 1999 the CFIA introduced First Reading of Bill C-80, which would have provided a truly modernized legal basis for the regulation of food and related activities, but which did not proceed for political reasons. With the current *Safe Food for Canadians Act* (and *Regulations*) now being completed, finally we will have a more modern legal foundation for the future, though not as integrated as the former Bill would have provided.

With an annual budget of over \$700 million and more than 6,000 staff, the CFIA is, by far, Canada's largest science-based regulatory agency, respected within the federal system and by the provinces, and admired around the world as a model.

The CFIA has met most of our original expectations. While there have been bumps along the road, Canadians should be proud of the Agency's many achievements. Its anniversary should be celebrated. 🍷

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