



Yes, **CFIA**, safe food is the priority but **it's not your only job**

Ron Doering

In a recent column I wrote on the occasion of the 20th birthday of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), I proudly concluded that the CFIA had mostly met its original objectives. Since then I have received several responses from industry leaders suggesting I was overly generous in my assessment. Several responses focused particularly on one complaint: that too many at the CFIA seemed to have forgotten that in addition to its primary role to protect the health and safety of Canadians, the CFIA also has a clear legislative mandate to help the commercial interests of Canadian industry.

From the very beginning of the 1995 consultations with industry, all sectors expressed grave concern that while consolidating 16 programs delivered by four different departments might promote efficiency and effectiveness and provide a single point of contact for consumers, industry and the provinces, such consolidation might also result in an erosion of the longstanding understanding that while safe food was the overarching priority, all programs also had an important role in promoting the commercial health of the various sectors. To answer this fear, we changed the draft legislation to specify that the minister responsible for the CFIA would be the minister of Agriculture, and we built right into the legislation that the CFIA's mandate included the "promotion of trade and commerce." Without this solemn promise to industry, it's unlikely that the CFIA would have been created.

Of course, except in situations where

consumer health and safety is threatened, such as in a case of an outbreak of foodborne illness, inspecting for safe food and promoting market access are not conflicting objectives. The most important marketing advantage for the Canadian food industry is Canada's reputation for safe food and the credibility of our rigorous regulatory system. Putting the whole food chain — seeds, feeds, fertilizer, plant protection, animal health, and all food commodities including fish — under the same umbrella agency created a real opportunity for a more comprehensive and focused approach to promoting international market access for Canadian products. Moreover, still unique in the world, we would have one agency to negotiate equivalency agreements and other arrangements for access. Many products can only be exported if they first receive CFIA certification. That is how we export food, plants and animals to over 100 countries, usually without re-inspection.

After raising this issue in my speech at the recent annual meeting of the Canadian Meat Council, many participants confirmed the problem and stressed that it has been seriously worsening in the last three years since the Conservative government changed the primary reporting relationship of the CFIA to the minister of Health. One industry leader insisted that it was obvious that since then "the CFIA is giving less time, resources and attention to industry's commercial needs." Another reported that "most CFIA inspectors now seem to think their sole job is consumer protection, and



market access is just not part of their job." Another added that "increasingly, and particularly in the last few years, the culture of the CFIA is that they're in the public health business; the health of the industry is none of their concern."

There is a great deal of talk these days about the potential for Canada to be an agri-food powerhouse. Canadians can't eat much more food, so the key is to increase exports. Our industry is up to the task, but the agri-food business (unlike many other industry sectors) cannot even begin to achieve its potential unless the government does its job to: 1. Provide a clear, responsive and well implemented regulatory system that will serve to improve competitiveness, enhance investment and promote innovation; and 2. Remind the CFIA that it is also its responsibility to help industry gain greater market access and then adequately resource this function.

Meat industry leaders tell me that they have already met the new CFIA president and stressed the need to change attitudes and to reinvigorate the market access function. This is a good start, but real progress will require a united and sustained push. 🍎

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