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SUMMARY

A Canadian Perspective on an Integrated Approach to Food Safety

The food safety system in Canada operates in a multi-jurisdictional setting. At the federal level, the system is integrated by Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). Within government, co-operative federal/provincial/territorial structures are in place including targeted funding support from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC). Two major integrated food safety initiatives are described by the Canadian Food Safety Adaptation Program (CFSAP) and the Canadian On-Farm Food Safety Program (COFFSP). Canada is committed to implementing an integrated and science-based approach to enhance food safety. The overall strategy is based on shared responsibility, the use of Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles/practices and the introduction of leading technologies and detection methods within government and across the food industry. The goal is to enhance food safety in Canada and to maintain domestic and international recognition of the safety of Canadian products.

Implementation of an integrated approach to enhance food safety has resulted in important lessons learned with respect to: the importance of the participation of partners/stakeholders from across the food continuum and the potential benefits such as improved lines of communication, the development of better regulatory policy and interventions and the efficient use of government resources; the practical challenges in working closely with partners/stakeholders to design and implement significant regulatory changes; the level of effort required by industry and other stakeholders to successfully implement changes; and the need for ongoing consultation with regulating staff as new skills and training may be required to meet emerging regulatory changes and the requirements of new science and technologies.

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Introduction

There is increasing national and international awareness of the importance of food safety as a result of the identification of emerging foodborne pathogens and new hazards from imported and domestically produced foods. Although Canada is recognized as having one of the safest food supplies in the world, Health Canada estimates that there are two million cases of foodborne illness each year in Canada, which costs Canadian health services, industry and society as much as \$1 billion. Reducing the number and severity of these incidents is a priority for government and industry.

The growing integration of economies around the world and the resulting flows of goods and services have contributed to a Canadian food and beverage industry valued in excess of \$130 billion. This value is a direct reflection of the confidence Canadian and foreign buyers, including consumers, place in the food system. The scale, scope and links among the systems from food production to consumption mean that today's food safety challenges need to involve all stakeholders in the development and implementation of integrated system-wide strategies.

The Canadian Regulatory System for Food Safety

The food safety system in Canada operates in a multi-jurisdictional setting. At the federal level, the system is integrated by Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). Health Canada has the lead federal role for setting the standards and policies that govern the safety and nutritional quality of food while, the CFIA has the lead federal role for their enforcement. These enforcement activities are shared between the CFIA, provinces, territories as well municipalities, each within their own jurisdictions.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) provides funding for the industry to meet food safety objectives such as developing on-farm food safety initiatives under the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund (CARD).

Structures to facilitate cooperation amongst industry (i.e.: producers, processors, importers, distributors and retailers) and consumers have been established to foster the development of harmonized initiatives across all jurisdictions. The Canadian Food Inspection System Implementation Group, the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Agri-Food Inspection Committee and the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee on Food Safety Policy have provided fora to foster collaborative approaches in key areas.

An Integrated Approach to Food Safety - The Strategy

Canada is committed to implementing an integrated and science-based approach to enhance food safety. The overall strategy is based on shared responsibility, the use of Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles/practices and the introduction of leading technologies and detection methods within government and across the food industry. The goals are to enhance food safety in Canada and to maintain domestic and international recognition of the safety of Canadian products. The process involves defining accountabilities more clearly across the entire food continuum and working with partners and stakeholders more closely.

These goals have been reaffirmed by the Canadian federal, provincial and territorial ministers of agriculture, in June 2001, in their national Agricultural Policy Framework. The Framework is a

multi-faceted approach to build Canada's reputation as a producer of safe, high-quality food and to improve farmers' ability to manage risk.

This integrated approach to food safety recognizes the complexity of the food continuum from production to consumption and responds to major environmental pressures such as:

- ◆ globalization and the growing integration of economies around the world;
- ◆ consumerism/changing consumer preferences and the changing demographics of the Canadian population;
- ◆ increasing levels of international trade between Canada and other countries;
- ◆ the growing importance of international and multi-lateral agreements to protect animal, plant and public health and safety and facilitate the movement of safe, quality products into and out of Canada; and
- ◆ the acceleration of the harmonization of international standards.

Examples of Integrated Food Safety Initiatives

The broad strategy to enhance food safety comprises a variety of initiatives. For example, AAFC is funding two major integrated food safety initiatives - the Canadian Food Safety Adaptation Program (CFSAP) and the Canadian On-Farm Food Safety Program (COFFSP) - under the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund. These two programs are administered by the CFIA and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture respectively; the CFIA provides the scientific and technical support to the industry for both programs. The emphasis of these programs is the partnership of both industry and government as well as the collaboration and participation of all stakeholders.

Canadian Food Safety Adaptation Program

The Canadian Food Safety Adaptation Program cost-shares, with the food industry, activities that enable national associations or groups who are involved directly or indirectly in the production, marketing, distribution and preparation of food to develop risk management strategies, tools, and systems to enhance food safety from *gate to plate*. The use of HACCP principles as a tool is the common denominator. Of particular importance is the industry-led Technical Advisory Group (TAG) for the CFSAP which provides valuable input on the overall direction and management of the program and in which Health Canada, CFIA, AAFC, provinces and the COFFSP are represented.

Approximately 65 national associations are eligible. To date, eleven projects are approved for program funding. The scope of these projects includes the horizontal functions such as transportation, retailing, food service, and manufacture as well commodities such as red meat and poultry, grains and oil seeds and produce. As projects are implemented, they are expected to result in other applications to enhance the food safety continuum. The CFSAP complements the efforts of the CFIA to continually improve and enhance Canada's approaches to food safety through science and HACCP principles such as the Food Safety Enhancement Program and the Quality Management Program.

Canadian On-Farm Food Safety Program

The Canadian On-Farm Food Safety Program, which covers *field/barn to gate*, is linked to the CFSAP. The COFFSP is a partnership between the federal government and industry that encourages national primary product associations to develop the strategies and the necessary tools to educate producers and initiate the implementation of on-farm food safety initiatives consistent with HACCP principles.

The combination of the CFSAP and the COFFSP, support HACCP based food safety programs from *production to consumption*. AAFC's Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund and CFIA participation in both the CFSAP and COFFSP demonstrate the government's and industry's commitment to dealing with food safety throughout the food continuum from primary production to the retail level including horizontal support sectors which cross commodity lines using HACCP principles as a tool.

Lessons Learned

The complexity of the food continuum requires that the responsibilities for food safety be shared among all stakeholders in the system. Approaches that focus on individual aspects/segments of the system, for example, may compromise the desired outcome of enhanced food safety.

In developing and implementing an integrated strategy and approach, our experience suggests:

- ◆ the participation of partners/stakeholders from across the food continuum is essential;
- ◆ there are practical challenges in working closely with partners/stakeholders to design and implement significant regulatory changes that support an integrated strategy - for example, consultation can be more time consuming and there may be competing issues and priorities such as competitive advantage within industry and possible public/consumer unease with respect to the degree of industry involvement in regulatory changes;
- ◆ work with stakeholders is most productive when the purpose of the consultation/ collaboration is clearly identified and the process for stakeholder involvement is transparent to all participants - it is very encouraging to see the various national associations working with each other to develop enhanced food safety approaches;
- ◆ the benefits of partners/stakeholders involvement can be significant and may include improved lines of communication across the food continuum, the development of better regulatory policy and interventions and an efficient use of government resources;
- ◆ the level of effort required by industry and other stakeholders may be significant in order to successfully implement change across the food continuum and enhance food safety - this needs to be acknowledged in terms of appropriate timelines for transition to the new ways of doing business; and
- ◆ communication with partners/stakeholders and regulatory bodies are critical - in the process of consultation and decision making, the need to inform regulating staff is very important and should not be overlooked. For example, new skills and training may be needed to meet emerging regulatory changes and the requirements of new science and technologies - early communication can reduce uncertainty and enhance staff participation.