

Canadians don't trust companies on food safety: Poll

BY SARAH SCHMIDT, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 19, 2009



A new poll suggests consumers don't trust food companies to inspect their products properly, and would like to see a hands-on approach from the federal government.

Photograph by: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald

OTTAWA — Most Canadians don't trust industry to ensure the food they consume is safe and want the government to be more hands-on in policing food companies, according to results of a national survey.

The survey of 1,001 Canadians, with findings to be released Wednesday, determined that only 13.7 per cent put their faith in food companies compared to 72.4 per cent who identified government food inspectors and scientists when asked which player they trust most to ensure the food they buy at the grocery store is safe to consume.

And while seven out of 10 say government should be more proactive in policing food companies and invest more resources to do that, far fewer (21.9 per cent) believe government should rely more on companies to police their own safety processes.

The survey also found that only 12.4 per cent of Canadians have a high level of trust in food companies to assess themselves when it comes to compliance with safety rules. Conversely, 50.3 per cent said they hold industry in very low regard, either not trusting companies at all (23 per cent) or having low trust (27.3 per cent); 33 per cent were neutral, scoring three on a five-point scale.

Nanos Research conducted the survey on behalf of the Agriculture Union, a wing of the Public Service Alliance of Canada representing government meat inspectors.

Neither side fared well when Canadians were asked specifically how best to describe last summer's deadly listeriosis outbreak after contaminated meat produced at a Maple Leaf Foods plant in Toronto made its way to the marketplace, resulting in the deaths of 22 people.

Sixty-four per cent of Canadians said incidents such as the listeriosis outbreak are avoidable, either because the government "turned over critical inspection duties to industry" (25.7 per cent) or businesses "cut food-safety corners to save money" (37.9 per cent).

Fewer than three in 10 (27.3 per cent) believe these incidents "are simply unfortunate and unavoidable accidents."

"It's telling government that people expect the government to take a positive role in this area, and not just simply say that it's up to the companies," said Bob Kingston, head of the Agriculture Union.

"The laws that are there to protect Canadians have to be enforced by somebody the population feels is accountable to them, not accountable to Michael McCain or corporate interests or shareholders of a company."

Kingston is scheduled to testify next week at a special parliamentary probe into the listeriosis outbreak and the state of food safety in Canada. McCain, president and CEO of Maple Leaf Foods, and executives of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency have already testified.

As was the case immediately after the deadly food-borne disease outbreak last summer, McCain took full responsibility for the incident during his testimony last month, emphasizing any failings were those of the company and not a result of poor government oversight. At the time of the listeriosis outbreak, government inspectors stationed at federally registered meat plants were using a new inspection regime called Compliance Verification System, in which they complete specific tasks on a prescribed timetable and review paperwork produced by the operators to make sure companies follow their own food-safety protocols.

If they find shortcomings, inspectors order a correction action report, granting companies a certain time period to make necessary adjustments.

"I think the government should pay attention," Kingston said of the survey results. "I don't think they can keep devolving this stuff the way they have been just to save a buck."

The random Nanos telephone survey is considered accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.