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8 August, 2011

The Honourable Gerry Ritz, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food
and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Minister,

Re: Abandoning provincial meat inspection programs in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and BC

I have been briefed by the CFIA about your decision to abandon delivery of meat inspection in provincially registered meat plants in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. No later than January 2014, CFIA inspectors will no longer inspect provincially registered facilities in these provinces.

As a result of this decision, inspection of meat from provincially registered facilities in these provinces will likely fall below acceptable standards, and will certainly be beneath the standards and meat inspection practices enjoyed by Canadians living elsewhere. For example, the provincial meat inspection systems in Alberta and Ontario are well established and well supported, so meat inspection conducted in these provinces will be superior.

For the governments of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, the cost of meat inspection will likely triple because CFIA has provided this service below cost for some years. With less than half of the required budget, these provinces will be faced with inspecting all provincially registered meat production facilities with an inexperienced staff that is not big enough to cover the territory and which lacks the necessary supportive infrastructure.

You know yourself how time consuming it is to hire new meat inspectors and to provide the necessary training and mentoring to bring them to full strength. Your deadline is unrealistic and will leave any province seeking to establish its meat inspectorate from scratch with insufficient transition time, further increasing the risk people in these provinces will face.

There are key differences between the federal meat inspection system and the provincial systems. The federal system focuses on critical points in the production process where contamination could have serious public health consequences, while the provincial systems are more outcome or product-focused. Each approach has its own merits and benefits but it is widely recognized that the provincial approach requires more resources to achieve adequate safety standards. It seems certain that, faced with a tripling of costs as a result of the withdrawal of the CFIA from delivering this service, the governments of BC, Saskatchewan and Manitoba will not be in a position to invest what is needed to achieve the safety standards of other provinces which have well established systems.

The bottom line is that by walking away from this responsibility, the federal government is needlessly exposing consumers in BC, Saskatchewan and Manitoba to elevated risks from eating meat produced in provincial registered establishments.

Provincial meat inspection standards are often much less stringent than those that are in place for federally registered facilities. This fact was painfully underscored by a recent high profile incident at Pitt Meadows Meats Ltd in British Columbia. Soon after the facility owner publicly admitted hiding test results from the federal meat inspector which indicated dangerous E. coli O157:H7 contamination at the facility, he opted out of the federal inspection regime entirely and registered as a provincial facility which allowed his plant to meet the lower provincial standard and to keep operating without missing a beat.

This is much more important than some federal/provincial squabble over tax points or jurisdiction. No responsible Minister should allow people to be exposed to dangerous products in this manner. I urge you to re-consider this decision. Lives could depend on it.

Please get back to me at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Bob Kingston
National President