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Ottawa dumps meat inspection on British Columbia *Consumers will face new and higher risk*

Vancouver – Ottawa plans to dump inspection of dozens of meat plants on the British Columbia government in a move that will expose unwitting BC consumers to heightened risk of eating contaminated meat products, according to the Agriculture Union – PSAC, which represents federal food safety inspectors.

After providing meat safety inspection service for decades, the union has been advised by Canadian Food Inspection Agency that federal inspectors will no longer check BC establishments that produce meat for BC consumers only for E. coli, listeria, salmonella and other contaminants that can have deadly consequences when eaten.

No later than January 2014, responsibility will fall to the province of BC which has no meat inspectors and little of the support infrastructure needed to do the job to current but inadequate safety standards.

CFIA inspectors will continue to conduct food safety work in meat plants that are federally registered, a situation that will widen the existing gap in federal and provincial meat inspection standards.

“To save a few bucks, the federal government is creating a two-tiered food safety system in which some Canadians enjoy higher standards while others suffer higher risk,” said Agriculture Union President Bob Kingston.

At a news conference in Vancouver held to underscore the new risk consumers will face and the double standard this decision will only make worse, Kingston launched an online petition at www.foodsafetyfirst.ca calling on the government to change its plans.

“Consumers expect their meat products to be inspected for safety by the CFIA. Otherwise, there is no way for consumers to know if meat has been properly inspected,” Kingston said.

Kingston also released the text of a letter taking the federal Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz who is responsible for the CFIA to task for this decision:

“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.”

For the government of British Columbia, the cost of inspecting almost 60 meat production facilities that are provincially registered will triple because CFIA has provided this service below cost for some years. With less than half of the required budget, BC 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.

“The bottom line is that by walking away from this responsibility, the federal government is needlessly exposing consumers to elevated risks from eating meat produced in provincially registered establishments,” said Bob Jackson, Regional Executive Vice-President of the PSAC, who joined Kingston at the news conference today.

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 the 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.

Ottawa is also abandoning inspection of provincially registered meat plants in Saskatchewan and Manitoba which, like BC, have no meat inspectors.

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, meat inspection systems in Alberta and Ontario are well established and well supported, so meat inspection conducted in these provinces will be superior.

The federal government is resurrecting the plan to abandon this service in BC, Saskatchewan and Manitoba after it was shelved following the Maple Leaf food poisoning outbreak which left 22 people dead.

It is expected that 65 food inspector jobs will be eliminated by this decision at a time when the federal government is under sharp criticism for its weak food safety inspection system. More food safety inspector positions may be eliminated as a result of the federal government’s current program review.