

Largest tainted meat recall in Canadian history

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E. coli bacterial contamination originating in XL Foods' Lakeside meat processing plant in Brooks, Alberta has seriously sickened at least sixteen people nationwide and led to the largest meat product recall in Canadian history.

Over 1,800 items have been pulled from store shelves across Canada and the United States due to the possibility of *E. coli* contamination, with the US recall involving more than 1.1 million kilograms of beef sold by 23 grocery store chains in more than 30 states.

The Lakeside slaughterhouse is Canada's second largest cattle processing facility. The plant has been closed since September 16 with over 2,000 meat packers on layoff. Yesterday the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) announced that the plant can now "progressively" restart operations.

Estimates of beef tonnage affected in Canada have not yet been made public, but Lakeside recently dumped over 600 tonnes of meat in local landfills with plans for further disposals in the coming days. The dumping of the suspect meat drew the ire of Danielle Smith, the leader of the provincial opposition, the right-wing populist Wildrose Party, who had suggested that the beef—although not deemed safe for commercial sale—should be distributed to the homeless and other poor "hungry" people. For her part, Conservative Alberta Premier Alison Redford has rejected calls for a public inquiry into the fiasco.

Federal Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz, who presided over the 2008 listeriosis outbreak, has once again refused to acknowledge any government responsibility for the crisis, instead using his office to promote the beef industry. He cut off a recent press conference after just seven minutes when questions zeroed in on his own culpability. Later that same day, as was reported in the Battleford, Saskatchewan *News-Optimist*, with the massive beef recall still in full throttle, he sat down to a plate of meat at a business luncheon and declared, "I don't know where this beef comes from and I don't care. I know it's good. I know it's safe."

Though not as deadly as the 2008 listeriosis outbreak at Toronto's Maple Leaf Foods packing plant that killed 23 people, the current episode once again raises a number of serious questions about the efficacy of the food safety system in

Canada. Foremost is the role of food inspectors and lax regulations in a system that places corporate profit far above any other consideration.

Tainted meat was produced in the plant over five days beginning in late August when the company failed to follow its own meat safety protocols. Food safety problems were first recorded on September 4, 2012, when the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) detected *E. coli* O157:H7 in products produced from an Alberta facility supplied by XL Foods Inc. That same day, the United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) notified the CFIA of a positive *E. coli* O157:H7 sample in beef trimmings from XL Foods Inc.

The next day, the CFIA continued its investigation to determine the source of the contamination and whether there was a connection between the two positive test results—one found by CFIA and one by FSIS. In addition, the CFIA issued a mild "corrective action request" to the Alberta facility supplied by XL Foods Inc., where the initial positive finding originated. It would take eleven more days for the public to receive a health warning and a limited meat recall to be instituted and a further three weeks before Canadian authorities chose to temporarily suspend XL Foods' operating license.

Food inspectors in the United States, themselves operating under steadily deregulated protocols, nonetheless deemed the situation serious enough to close the border to Canadian beef processed at the Alberta plant thirteen days before their Canadian counterparts moved to close XL's Lakeside operation.

Throughout this period, the CFIA acted more as a company quality control manager than a federal regulator charged with protecting public health. On September 12, the US's FSIS notified the CFIA that it had found two more positive *E. coli* O157:H7 samples in beef trimmings originating from XL Foods Inc. through intensified sampling and that the affected shipments were being held at the border. The next day, the U.S. closed its border to all products from the XL's Lakeside plant. On September 13, the first case of consumer *E. coli* poisoning was recorded. Yet the CFIA continued to allow XL to process and ship large volumes of meat.

During its investigations, the CFIA determined that XL had

deviated from its documented *E. coli* O157:H7 control measures and sampling and testing procedures. In addition, the company was also unable to demonstrate through its documentation that it was consistently and effectively implementing its agreed-upon control program. The CFIA languidly gave the company several more “corrective action requests” with time to correct the problems. But by September 26 the regulator concluded that the deficiencies had not been addressed and that “the company has not adequately implemented agreed upon corrective actions and has not presented acceptable plans to address longer-term issues.” The CFIA suspended XL’s license the following day.

With XL’s license suspended, the CFIA began acting as *de facto* plant management. It began by overseeing a massive plant cleaning and disinfection, followed by a review of the plant’s food safety protocols and controls. Impatient with this process, if not in outright retaliation, XL laid off the entire plant workforce, approximately 2000 workers, on October 13. A company news release stated that the layoffs were necessary because the CFIA could not definitively say when the plant could resume full operations. It subsequently recalled 800 workers for one day, however, when the CFIA complained that it could not continue its process testing without workers.

A few days later, in a related move that again appeared aimed at the CFIA, XL announced an agreement to have JBS USA manage its Lakeside plant. JBS is a leading animal protein processor in the U.S. and Australia and a wholly owned subsidiary of Brazil-based JBS S.A. A 2009 *E. coli* contamination of meat products at one of JBS’s U.S. plants caused 17 people in ten states to become seriously ill.

Last year, a full three years after the 2008 Maple Leaf Foods contamination, the Weatherill public inquiry issued some 57 recommendations to address deficiencies in Canada’s meat inspection procedures. Like public inquiries since time immemorial, however, the inquiry had more to do with government face-saving requirements than actual reform. Both the CFIA and independent food scientists have complained that the inquiry’s largely milquetoast recommendations have yet to be implemented.

The Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has certainly been culpable in its headlong rush to reduce or eliminate regulations in a whole plethora of industries. Its massive and continuing cuts in departmental budgets and the layoff of thousands of civil servants have been well documented. But the deregulation of the meat industry has been going on for decades under both Conservative and Liberal federal governments. It was the Mulroney Conservative government that forced meat inspectors to take responsibility for more than one processing plant even at a time when the industry was moving from relatively small-scale butchering plants to massive, industrialized assembly-line operations. And it was the Liberal government of Paul Martin that in 2005 rewrote the inspection protocols to give the processing

companies themselves “self-policing” powers.

Meatpacking plants are mired in filth and gore, from which food fit for human consumption is expected to emerge. Sanitation issues are staggering, and complicated by the vast scale and industrial concentration in this sector, with food contamination by bacteria such as *E. coli* O157 a real and ongoing hazard. The sector’s rapid growth has exacerbated these problems. For example, when the Nilsson Bros. Group, a small local company based in Edmonton, bought XL Foods Inc. in 1998 for \$24 million, it set the stage for further acquisitions. Ten years later, XL bought the Brooks plant from the US-based Tyson Foods for \$145 million. As a result, XL controlled and operated facilities in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nebraska and Idaho, while its Lakeside operation in Brooks had become one of the largest beef processing operations in Canada.

Corporate growth and the drive for super-profits were invariably coupled with line speedups. XL has been the recipient of over \$2 million in grants from the Alberta government to increase the rate of cow slaughter at its Lakeside plant. The result is that Lakeside slaughters 4,000 cows in a full day, cutting them into about two million pounds of beef. According to the *Globe and Mail*, “That’s the equivalent of 3,000 steaks a minute.”

Speedups also made work on the line more mind-numbingly risky. One newspaper reported, “You have 35 seconds: Gut the cow without damaging its organs, and be sure not to drop the stomach on the floor. Do not cut yourself with the swift-moving blade; do not touch the scalding sanitary surfaces. Then, walk in hot water to clean your white rubber boots. Swap your knife out and start over again. Again and again.”

XL workers spotted food safety problems, but taking action to correct these put them at direct odds with the plant’s management. Moreover, many employees are temporary foreign workers whose hopes to qualify for permanent residency are bound up with their retaining their jobs. The union in the plant, the United Food and Commercial Workers, limited its outrage at the safety lapses to statements delivered only after the full extent of the contamination had been made public. As a result, there was little incentive to correct, much less challenge, the plant’s management. It caused Canadian food microbiologist Doug Powell to remark, “I see absolutely no evidence of any food-safety culture at XL... What we’ve seen at XL Foods is that safety is at the bottom of the list.”



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