Canadian Officials Want to Fine Meat Plants for Food Safety Problems

John Cotter, The Canadian Press

EDMONTON (The Canadian Press) — The federal government is proposing to give itself the power to fine meat-processing plants that break hygiene and other operating rules meant to protect human health.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency [1] says the regulatory change would give it another enforcement tool to help protect consumers.

But meat industry representatives and a food safety expert are skeptical.

"These proposed new fines demonstrate our commitment to ensuring that Canada's stringent food safety requirements are being followed," Lisa Murphy, a CFIA spokeswoman, wrote in an email from Ottawa.

"AMPs (administrative monetary penalties) will help the CFIA better protect consumers from food producers that fail to comply with federal food safety requirements."

Inspectors already have the power to issue written warnings to companies when problems at meat plants are found. In serious cases, the CFIA can suspend a plant's licence and shut it down.

The CFIA said the proposed fines range from $2,000 to $15,000 for violations. They could be imposed on a company that was regularly identified for not following food safety rules.

The Canadian Meat Council represents federally inspected meat-packing and processing companies. Spokesman Ron Davidson said such fines are not needed.

"The meat industry does not believe there is a necessity for yet another enforcement tool," he said.

Davidson wonders why the federal government isn't seeking to apply such fines to the entire food-processing sector. He suggests Ottawa is singling out the meat industry.

He said the industry wants assurances about how fines would be imposed and what steps would be taken to ensure they would be applied in a consistent way across the country.

"We are not pleased that it is being imposed on us ahead of the other sectors," he said. "Every inspector is going to have the opportunity to impose fines."

The CFIA said initially fines will be recommended by inspectors, but issued by area investigators to ensure consistency.

The agency said it wants to see how well the fines work in the meat industry before using them for other food commodities.

Rick Holley, a University of Manitoba food-safety expert, said issuing fines won't make the meat-processing sector any safer.

Holley said the main challenge the government needs to grapple with is ensuring that food-safety inspectors are rigorously trained to a uniform standard — and that the training is ongoing.

"I don't think that this attempt is going to improve the safety of food in Canada by one iota," Holley said.

"The real issue here is the performance of the inspectors in terms of appropriately identifying where problems are that are of significant health impact and then doing followup."

The proposal for fines follows the release of an independent report last June into the recall of seven million kilograms of beef products from the XL Foods plant in southern Alberta.

Beef from the plant was linked to 18 people becoming ill in 2012 from a potentially deadly strain of E. coli.

The report found the Alberta plant failed to clean equipment properly and that government inspectors failed to notice and deal with problems.

The federal government responded to the report with a plan to improve food-safety inspections and make E. coli controls more stringent.

To make the fines possible the government has said it plans to amend existing agriculture and agri-Food regulations.

It is not clear when Health Canada plans to make the amendments or when the change would come into effect.

"We anticipate the regulations may be finalized this year, and if this happens, the CFIA will work with industry to ensure the new system for meat inspection is implemented effectively."

The deadline for groups to submit comments to the government on its plan was Saturday.

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