

## **PMO's orders during tainted-meat crisis caught Ritz off guard: sources**

By Steve Rennie

OTTAWA -- Prime Minister Stephen Harper's aides ordered an ill-prepared Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz to face the media during the listeriosis crisis, raising tensions between the two offices, sources have told The Canadian Press.

During a Sept. 4 conference call with scientists, doctors, bureaucrats and political staff, a member of Mr. Ritz's staff complained about how his boss had been treated.

A day earlier, the Prime Minister's Office insisted that Mr. Ritz chair a public briefing a few scant minutes after the minister had learned that Mr. Harper had announced an investigation into the health scare.

Mr. Ritz was caught flat-footed and ill-prepared, Alan Sakach, Mr. Ritz's director of communications, said during the conference call. "We can't send the minister out without any information," a source recalls Mr. Sakach saying.

Mr. Ritz had less than 10 minutes to prepare for the Sept. 3 news conference. It showed. He provided no details about the probe Mr. Harper had just announced.

"The mandate will be fairly wide and broad," he repeated throughout the briefing.

Mr. Ritz did not get an entirely sympathetic hearing from aides to the Prime Minister during the conference call, as officials from the Public Health Agency, Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Health Canada listened in uneasily.

"They were not respectful of Ritz," said one person who was in on the call.

The sources spoke to The Canadian Press on the condition of anonymity. The Conservatives have sought out and punished anyone believed to have provided embarrassing information to journalists.

Mr. Ritz was too anxious to declare the outbreak over, the sources said. At that time, 13 deaths had been linked to the recall of packaged meat from a Maple Leaf Foods plant in Toronto.

During virtually all of the teleconferences, the Agriculture Minister would ask the same questions: "Can I say we've turned the corner on this?" and "Can we go out there and say the numbers aren't changing?"

No, he was told by scientists and doctors, the listeria strain has an incubation period of up to 70 days and more cases were possible.

The number of deaths has since risen to 19.

Mr. Ritz has not been seen publicly for more than a week since apologizing for jokes made during a conference call in the middle of the health scare. Today, he is scheduled to attend a debate organized by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, his first public appearance since Sept. 17.

His recent absence is a change from his near-daily media briefings during the listeriosis outbreak. During that time, sources said, he also participated in daily conference calls with political staff and public servants.

Several people said they found it unusual that Mr. Ritz and the PMO were in on the calls, which they described as very politicized. "The presence of the minister himself on the calls was surprising," one official said. "On calls like this the presence of the minister really changes the dynamic. ... With the minister on the call, everyone's a little more tense.

"It certainly felt awkward."

Talk then turned to optics, sources said, with Mr. Ritz asking: "How are we going to make sure we've done as much damage control as possible?" and "How can we make sure we've got a lid on this?"

During an Aug. 30 call, Mr. Ritz asked whether there were "any more bombs out there," referring to potentially politically damaging news.