

Risky Food: Profits Before Health?

Michael McBane
National Co-ordinator
Canadian Health Coalition

*Presentation to the Agri-Food Outlook Conference
Truro, Nova Scotia*

March 22, 2001

Page 1 of 10

Introduction

I want to thank the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture for the invitation to participate in the Agri-food Outlook Conference. I'm a believer in open democratic discussion and so I welcome this opportunity to listen, learn, and share from my perspective as a public health advocate.

I feel close to farmers partly because of the time spend on summer holidays visiting with my father's brother, a beef farmer in the Ottawa Valley. I'm also a collector of oral tradition and have traced my family history back into Inverness, Scotland and the back hills of Mayo in West Ireland. I come from a tradition of subsistence farming that is thousands of years old. As Wendell Berry said: "Our people had everything but money".

The Canadian Health Coalition is an Ottawa-based lobby group working to improve Canada's public health system. Food safety issues have featured more prominently in our work since the federal government moved to a model of self-regulation and risk management for the food industry in 1997 with the creation of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. The Health Coalition membership included seniors, churches, nurses, students, and labour organizations.

There can be no health without clean, safe food. Spending money on a strong and independent food safety system will save lives and billions of dollars in health care costs.

Everyone who follows the news has serious reasons to be worried about the food we are eating.

- * Mad Cow disease spreading around the world through cannibalistic feed practices;
- * hog factories with toxic manure lagoons polluting water systems;
- * deadly food borne pathogens in our food like E-Coli 0157, salmonella, listeria, campylobacter;
- * abusive use of antibiotics in farm animals contributing to resistant germs in humans;
- * cancer-causing hormones in beef;
- * major recall of pork contaminated with a carcinogen;
- * humans ingesting genetically modified foods that are unlabelled, untested, and uninsurable.

The public has good reasons to have concerns about the safety of the food we eat. First, I want to address the issue of food safety being more than an optics problem. Second, I would like to talk about four examples of major threats to food safety and public health: first, cancer-causing hormones in beef; second, the excessive use of antibiotics in farm animals for growth promotion purposes; third, genetically modified organisms (GMO's); and fourth, the exposure to risk of Mad Cow disease in Canada.

In talking about these problems I'll be raising some of the hard questions that are being asked about the hazards inherent in the corporate concentration of food production.

Finally, I'll conclude with some comments about how and why farmers should reject the high-tech approach of the chemical and biotech industries and return to a more holistic model of agriculture that 'works with' rather than 'against' nature and the earth.

Food that kills - more than 'an optics' problem

In reading over the pre-conference survey of participants I noted that environmental issues and food safety are the top two issues of importance to farm businesses, followed closely by consumer health. This reflects the level of public awareness and concern for food safety and the environment. At the same time the survey reports on a point of view that says the public concern over the safety of industrial food products is media generated (e.g. "media brainwashes consumers").

More comments focus on the messenger, in this case media and communications technology - than the message. And the message is that more and more people are getting sick from eating industrial food products. I know enough about the media to know that where there's smoke there is fire.

This Sunday's *New York Times* (March 18, 2001) has a front page story entitled: "Contaminated food sickens millions despite advances". It goes on to report that every year in the U.S. there are 5,000 deaths, 325,000 hospitalizations and 76 million illnesses caused by food poisoning.

In Canada, the number of reported cases of food poisoning has doubled between 1981 and 1996 (from 9,000 to 18,000). Food poisoning outbreaks are vastly under reported. According to the WHO, for every reported incident, there are 350 cases that go unreported. From a public health point of view, the problem is unsafe food, not media "brainwashing consumers".

The official response of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and its client, the agri-food industries, is to put all the responsibility for food safety on the consumer. The official line from the CFIA about deadly E.coli 0157 in hamburger is: "The only thing we can say to people is cook your meat properly" (*Globe & Mail*, July 26, 2000). When asked by CBC radio why the CFIA doesn't insist that the meat industry test for E.coli, as required in the U.S., the official response was: "CFIA policy is not to require testing for E.coli in meat because it might give consumers a false sense of confidence in products if we test". Is our meat safe? Apparently the CFIA doesn't think so.

Unilever, the big U. K. food company funded some research which produced some surprising results about the causes of food poisoning. After examining more than 2000 food poisoning incidents, the research team found many weren't caused by the traditional failures listed in the official records. Instead, they were the fault of management failures: the company bosses had simply put profits before safety.

In Canada, 800 people, mostly young children were poisoned during a salmonella outbreak in 1998. The outbreak was traced to cheese in packaged Lunchmates, a popular snack made by J. M. Schneider Inc. The CFIA has never filed a report on the incident and classifies it as an X-file - unexplained and unsolved. The Auditor General of Canada was extremely critical of the CFIA's handling of the case and noted that they auditors were denied access to key documents.

The massive centralization of the fast-food industry in particular, dramatically increases risks to consumers according to the author of *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Given the scope of recent food disasters, the secrecy of the CFIA and the food industry, you can expect a lot more critical media coverage.

Case Study #1: Growth hormones in beef

Canada is at the centre of an international controversy about the safety of growth hormones in beef. A recent audit of Canada's food inspection system by the European Commission raises serious questions about the safety of hormone-treated meat. A growing body of scientific evidence highlights the dangers of exposing people to hormones. At greatest risk are pregnant women and prepubertal children. Hormone residues in meat products can disrupt the natural hormone balance. Because safety thresholds cannot be established for these hormones, the EU has banned their use in animals for human consumption 12 years ago. In the case of the growth hormone, estradiol, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that it is a "complete carcinogen". It exerts both tumour initiating and cancer promoting effects.

When Europe banned imports of Canadian beef containing these hormone agents, Canada challenged the EU at the WTO. The Canadian government is opposed to Europe's application of the precautionary principle in the case of beef hormones. The ban was imposed to protect public health until they safety for human health can be demonstrated by science. Prime Minister Chrétien and Agriculture Minister Vanclief claim to have a "science-based" approach to hormones. However, in April 1998, the EU formally requested the risk assessment data which Health Canada used to authorize the use of these hormones. Canada refused, claiming the data was secret.

Minister Vanclief responded to the EU audit by defending the use of animal hormones. "There has never been any scientific proof of any danger", stated Vanclief. This statement is revealing for two reasons. First, just because the federal government refuses to conduct scientific research into the risks of growth hormones for human health, it does not therefore mean that there are no risks. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Second, Health Canada's own scientists have said these hormones should be banned immediately. So much for a science-based approach.

The case of beef hormones illustrates the major regulatory shift in the role of government. We used to prevent harm from happening in the first place. But government has shifted from the "precautionary principle" to "risk management". Food safety regulators now "manage the damage" And the damage we are talking about is human illness and death.

You can see that food regulations are made to benefit drug manufacturers at the expense of public health and safety. It is also interesting to note that some of these beef hormones even reduce the grade of the meat, from a triple A rating to a double A. Beef producers need to decide who they are producing the meat for. You produce for the consumer don't you? The smart beef producer will produce drug-free meat in order to gain access to a lucrative European market, and in order to supply safe meat to Canadians. And Canadians will pay more for safe meat.

Case Study #2: Antibiotics in farm animals

In Monday's *Globe & Mail* (March 19, 2001) a story appeared saying that Health Canada regulators are under pressure to approve a poultry antibiotic blamed in the U. S. for creating human resistance to the antibiotic used to treat campylobacter, a leading cause of food-borne disease and death.

According to a recent editorial in the *New York Times*, the quantities of valuable antibiotics that are fed to animals every year is massive (Jan. 9, 2001). Meat producers in the U. S. use 8 times more antibiotics than what is used in human medicine. We're talking about 25 million pounds - roughly 70% of total U. S. antibiotic production - being fed to pigs, chickens, cows, and fish. The majority of these antibiotics aren't even used to fight infection - but for growth promotion purposes.

The abusive use of antibiotics was documented in Canada recently by the European Union audit team. Many of the drugs used in Canada including carbadox, an antibiotic used in pigs, are banned in Europe because they are complete carcinogens. In other words, these drugs induce and promote cancer.

In 1997, Health Canada sponsored a National consensus conference on antimicrobial resistance. The Action Plan to control antimicrobial resistance didn't even mention the problems associated with the massive use of antibiotics in livestock in Canada. Who paid for the conference? Bayer Inc, the manufacture of Baytril, the chicken drug that the U. S. FDA is trying to ban, and Pfizer Canada Inc, the manufacturer of carbadox.

Feeding antibiotics to animals from birth to slaughter may modestly improve meat industry profits, but it puts everyone's health at risk. It is time for farmers to rethink how pigs, cattle, poultry and fish are raised in Canada.

Case Study #3: GMO's in crops and food

The federal government has told Canadians that biotechnology must figure prominently in Canada's food production. The Chrétien government never consulted with Canadians or even discussed who would benefit from food biotechnology, or who would bear the risk and costs. Instead, our biotech future has been "determined" by a handful of upper echelon government managers and the Ag-biotech industry.

Canada now has genetically modified organisms mixed into 3/4 of all processed food. The federal regulatory policy for food biotechnology can be described as “see no evil”. GMO crops are “assumed” to be equivalent to naturally bred plants and are therefore not tested or assessed for human toxicity. In effect, Canadians are being force-fed GE food which has never been tested for human or environmental safety. Worse, Canadians don’t even have the choice as to whether or not they want to participate in this experiment.

This policy amounts to a human guinea approach. The federal government regulator has become an advocate of food biotechnology. Five years after Canadians began growing and eating food with GM ingredients, the federal government asked the Royal Society of Canada to evaluate the regulation and safety of these new food products. The 264 page Royal Society report was issued earlier this year and slammed the CFIA and Health Canada.

The RS documented an industry riddled with conflict of interest and concluded that Canadians have been used as human guinea pigs in a giant uncontrolled experiment. GM crops were not scientifically assessed for their safety, results of studies kept secret, and no data has been evaluated independently, according to the Royal Society.

Canada is the third largest grower of genetically modified crops in the world. Hundreds of millions of tax dollars have been invested in the industry. Corporate welfare for Ag-biotech. This puts the CFIA and Health Canada in a conflict of interest as the regulator and the promoter of a technology. When a regulator is also a investor and promoter of a technology, it results in a direct interest in exaggerating benefits and underestimating risk. “When government jumps in bed with the biotech industry, you will regulate for health and environmental safety?” That was a question asked about the mining industry in a *Globe & Mail* editorial in 1997, entitled: ‘Dust settles at Westray’.

The current levels of exaggeration, and misinformation about GMO’s bear the marks of a new religion or cult. Some call it a latter-day ‘golden calf’. Some think it may be more apt to call it a mad cow. My Celtic genes tell me something’s wrong. Common sense is the common trigger for the survival of the human species. And common sense says you don’t eat a Bt toxin that kills monarch butterflies.

Science is neither intrinsically good nor evil. At issue is who is using it and how are they using it. In the words of Mae-Wan Ho, a geneticist: “Science is not bad, but there is bad science. Genetic engineering is bad science working with big business for quick profit against the public good”. Professor Ho’s views are shared by hundreds of scientists around the world and by figures like the Prince of Wales. Prince Charles identified 10 unanswered questions about biotech food. After he published the questions in the British papers and posted them on his web site the public response has been overwhelming. Prince Charles said: “What I believe the public’s reaction shows is that instinctively we are nervous about tampering with Nature when we can’t be sure that we know enough about all the consequences.” To this day his basic questions have not been answered.

Monsanto and other Ag biotech giants are selling GMO's as the saviour of the hungry peasants in the Third World. But according to the respected charity in the U. K. "Christian Aid": The introduction of genetically engineered crops to the world's poorest countries would be 'irrelevant' to ending hunger and may in fact worsen the situation - whereas - "land reform and simple irrigation could boost present crop production in developing countries by 50%".

If Ottawa was developing food biotechnology on a sound scientific basis, why is the testing of GMO's commercially secret? Why is all technical data and scientific assessments secret. Why are adverse effects on human health and the environment secret? According to the recent Royal Society report on food biotechnology, you can't claim to have a regulatory system based on "sound science" if it is not open to peer review and available for all to see and debate. That's what science is. If something's secret, it is not science, it is something else.

I want to tell the story of Dr. Arpad Pusztai. He is a scientist who published over 300 articles on plant lectins. He is also a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He developed a rigorous method for testing transgenic potatoes on rats. After only 10 days, the rats developed a weakened immune system and abnormal development of the pancreas, intestines, prostate, testicles, liver, and brain. The genetic instability of the potato was also startling. Within 2 days of making these preliminary findings known, he was fired, his team of 18 scientists disbanded, the lab closed and all the data was confiscated, including his personal notes and his computer.

You would think that these kinds of preliminary results would call for more research not less. Dr. Pusztai said: "We are eating things which we have not eaten before. And I challenge anyone who can predict the consequences of this. Particularly for our immune system, which is there to protect us from any injury coming from the outside world".

Is genetically modified food safe? Dr. Pusztai, he would say: 'nobody knows and they won't let anyone find out'. His research has been published in the medical journal, the *Lancet* (16 Oct. 1999).

Case Study #4: Mad Cow Disease

I want to say a few words about Mad Cow disease to you today. If there's anything to provoke a good hard look at intensive farming policy and the promotion of over-production of cheap food, this is it. Mad Cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) or BSE, is believed to be spread by feeding rendered animal parts back to cows. Now farmers know that cows are designed by nature to eat grass. That's why they are called ruminants. Cows are not supposed to eat other cows. The cannibalistic feeding practices still continue to this day.

Worse than that, we imported nearly 3 million kilograms of meat & bone meal from the U.K. and Europe, after the BSE threat was identified. Talk about asking for trouble. Canada's feed regulations are full of so many holes, they have been described as a white picket fence when we need a fire wall.

A recent Canadian Press report said that road kill and dead pets are rendered into animal feed. This can include deer and elk. According to Dr. Claude Lavigne of the CFIA: “We don’t regulate that so we have no idea how much could be picked up”. The president of the Canadian Renderers Association said: “We renderers process any animal not prohibited by law”.

Because of the vertically integrated industrial factory farm system, once BSE gets in, it will get recycled and spread on a large scale. Mad cow disease and its equivalent forms in other animals and in humans is a natural mutation that occurs once in a million. It was self-limiting until industrial agriculture started recycling animal parts in animal feed. There is one sure and simple way to stop the transmission chain of Mad Cow infection - stop feeding animal protein back to animals.

Why don’t we listen to the warnings of WHO and the FAO? Again, Dr. Claude Lavigne of the CFIA has the answer: rendered animal feed is too important to the industry. It appears that, once again profits come before health.

Some see Mad Cow disease as a warning shot across the bow of intensive farming practices, the recycling and cannibalistic feeding practices, the abuse of animals, and the demand for cheap food at any cost. Mad Cow disease is nature’s way of saying something’s wrong. Mad Cow is proof that biological boundaries are real. Animal, plant, and human kingdom barriers can’t be transgressed with impunity.

In effect, the argo-food industry created a new disease by forcing the crossing of biological boundaries for commercial interests. For greater profits, grass eating animals are fed something they never eat in nature.

The practice of feeding rendered animal protein back to cattle is a fairly low-tech innovation. It does not compare with the complexity of putting human genes in pigs and cattle. The catastrophe of BSE is a warning of the unpredictable dangers inherent in efforts to tamper with biology.

Imagine the risks inherent in tampering with the genetic blueprint of life?

What does all this say about the agri-food industry?

It has been said recently that behind every food catastrophe of the past decade lies intensive farming policy and the promotion of over-production of cheap food. Who says that more is better in agriculture? The evidence suggests that more is worse, for the animals, for the water, for the land, for the farmers, and for public health.

The world of food production will never be the same after Mad Cow disease. I’d like to tell a story to illustrate this. A year or so ago I was invited by the French Embassy in Ottawa to participate in a workshop with food safety officials from France. They made a presentation about the effects of Mad Cow disease on public opinion about agri-business.

There were 6 components associated with the Mad Cow disaster:

1. Food can kill you.
2. Public health is sacrificed to profits
3. The food safety regulator can't be trusted
4. There are long term risks
5. Industrialization of food and agriculture is dangerous
6. Big business is using bad science

Canadian citizens too are questioning the food industry, the use of hormones and antibiotics, food GMO's, the impact of globalization and WTO rules on public health and safety.

Who is benefiting from all the risk in industrial food production? Who is choosing what we eat and why? What are the benefits to consumers of biotech food? Should we be centralizing our food and agricultural production in the hands of a few corporate conglomerates?

We are at a dramatic point in human history. The future of food could follow lies in two radically different directions.

1. That of GM foods, genetically engineered fish and animals, more drugs used as growth promoters. This model being pushed by the federal government and Ag-biotech will intensify and further industrialize agriculture on a global scale with adverse effects on human health, animal health, and the environment of unknown magnitude.
2. The other course, food could be increasingly produced by sustainable systems in which reliance on agrochemical inputs is drastically reduced and the emphasis put on sustainability, diversification, and rural and regional regeneration.

Farmers have to choose a direction. But beware of salesmen selling expensive inputs like genetically engineered seeds, etc. Farmers are on a capital intensive treadmill. As farm prices dive, Monsanto and others corporate giants are there to sell new technologies to farmers desperate to try anything. The economic benefits of this technology has not been proven. While farmers are suffering from years of depressed prices, a few giants of agribusiness enjoy soaring profits from the same line of goods. When you look at Canadian gross farm income versus realized net farm income, you see that every cent farmers gained from adapting to changing conditions has disappeared in increased costs.

If farmers are going to have any control over their lives, they have to reduce reliance on input costs, or else the cheque goes to the suppliers. But there's more than an economic case to be made against the GM food route. I was on a panel recently with the Senator Gustafson, the chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee. He said he wouldn't grow GM crops because he wouldn't let Monsanto onto his farm and sign away his control.

I've heard other farmers tell me: "I don't like corporate control and that's why I'm going organic." Farmers have a connection with the land that is more than economic. That's an attitude that reflects the spirit of Moses Coady's book and philosophy, *Masters Of Their Own Destiny*. Say what you want about Ag-biotech, but the one thing it is sure to take from a farmer is his and her control over their economic destiny.

The safe alternative

In the wake of the EU ban on hormone-injected beef 12 years ago, several beef farmers went organic. They are finding that there is a growing market for their meat. John Bastian started an organic beef farm in the Laurentians several years ago, and says he can't keep up with the demand. There's no question that raising hormone-free beef is more costly than going the hormone route. He pays extra for organic feed and it costs him more to take care of his 100 head of beef because they don't grow as quickly as cows on drugs. But when he started the farm, making money wasn't his main goal.

"Everyone wants to do something meaningful with their lives", he said. "I want to eat good food myself, and I wanted to make it available to people who are like-minded".

It comes down to cultural values and spiritual values. We need to take care as farmers, and as city dwellers, to live and act as part of the natural order. Unless we want to play God and re-engineer nature. Animals are part of the natural order, not just containers for feed and drugs. Our values need to be focussed on more than material prosperity. We need to work hard renewing our relationship with the environment, with domestic animals, with each other in our communities and with other societies on earth. A growing number of people are beginning to see the narrow focus greed and corporate power as a recipe for disaster.

At the end of the day, farmers and consumers are in the same boat. Neither can afford the costs of farm inputs like chemicals, GMO seed, and drugs in livestock. Farmers are going broke. Consumers are getting sick. Lets stop playing Russian roulette in food production with "risk management". The alternative is to produce clean, safe food with reduced input costs.

The family farms are the only way to protect food, animals, land and public health.

People should come before profits.