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Staff Shortages Hamper Meat Inspections: Union

By Janice Tibbetts, CanWest News Service

The federal agency that is responsible for the safety of Canada's meat has abandoned mandated audits of the meat inspection system, is suffering from a staffing shortage, and is accused of being too cosy with the industry it is supposed to police.

One veterinarian who works for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency warned yesterday that the system -- which politicians have heralded in recent days as one of the best in the world -- is slipping and it needs an immediate infusion of resources put into food safety inspections.

"The bottom line is that the agency does not have the resources it needs to deliver the mandate that it has under the laws of Canada," said Gary Thiessen, an Ottawa veterinarian who specializes in meat hygiene at the agency.

Former federal auditor general Denis Desautels also uncovered problems with the six-year-old agency, which has been under scrutiny this week as it scrambles to trace the history of a cow infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy -- mad cow disease.

A major problem is that the agency, which employs 4,400 people, needs hundreds more staffers in the field to oversee livestock and poultry inspections before and after slaughter, said Mr. Thiessen, who is his shop's union representative with the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada.

Another shortcoming is that the agency dismantled its team of auditors whose job it is, among other things, to evaluate the accuracy and uniformity of its inspections, determine training needs for inspectors and solve their concerns, Mr. Thiessen said.

In fact, the agency has never completed a full audit, even though it is required by law to carry them out every three to four years.

"Because the agency stopped doing internal audits, they have no idea how things are really going, the managers are not getting feedback on how things are working anymore," he said. "By and large, the agency is very highly reactive. Wherever the fire is today, that's where we go."

An agency spokesman said yesterday that employees were too busy working on mad cow disease to handle interviews about staff shortages and audits.

The meat inspection system is divided between the federal and provincial governments. Meat that stays within a province is provincial responsibility, while the federal government, which oversees the vast majority of inspections, is responsible for meat that leaves one province for another, or for export to another country.

Federal policies require abattoirs and processing and packing plants to be checked as often as monthly by government inspectors and veterinarians.

The auditor general, in a report two years ago, examined 21 suspect files and concluded that inspectors sometimes let problems go uncorrected for years.

The report also pointed out a recruitment problem at a time that an increasing number of inspectors are approaching retirement age.

Mr. Thiessen said there appears to be no solid effort to attract new people.

Mike McBane, the executive director of the Canadian Health Coalition, accused the agency of being in a conflict of interest because of its dual role, under the Department of Agriculture, to promote the food industry and protect public health.

"We basically see the interests of public safety compromised," Mr. McBane said.

The United States, which is Canada's biggest meat customer, does its own audits of Canadian plants. The 2001 audit, the most recent available, checked nine of the 513 establishments that export to the U.S. and it did not uncover any major concerns with the system.

Mr. Thiessen said Canada's inspection system still rates among the best in the world, but it is quickly losing ground to other developed countries, including the U.S. and Britain.

"We are going to have to make some major changes in a hurry or we are not going to be one of the better meat inspection programs within five years, for sure."

The agency has had a hard time recruiting veterinarians because of a combination of low pay, poor hours and working conditions and not enough qualified graduates.

The majority of today's veterinary graduates are women who often opt for private practice. The agency faces a tough sell for some of its jobs, which include night shifts at chicken slaughterhouses or border crossings to check meat shipments.