

Calgary Herald  
May 23, 2003

# Vet Warns Food Agency Isn't Doing Audits: More Staff, Financing Suggested

By Janice Tibbetts

The federal agency 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 be policing.

One veterinarian who works for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency warned Thursday that the system -- which politicians have heralded in recent days as one of the best in the world -- is slipping and 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 six-year-old agency.

Former federal auditor general Denis Desautels also uncovered problems with the six-year-old agency, which has been under scrutiny this week in the wake of a mad cow disease case in Alberta.

A major problem is that the agency, which employs 4,400 people, needs hundreds more staffers in the field to oversee routine livestock and poultry inspections before and after slaughter, said 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 veterinary auditors that was mandated, among other things, to evaluate the accuracy and uniformity of its inspection programs, determine training needs for inspectors and solve their concerns, said Thiessen.

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 on how things are really going, the managers are not getting feedback on how things are working anymore," Thiessen said.

"By and large, the agency is very highly reactive. Wherever the fire is today, that's where we go."

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

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.

A veterinarian with the Canada Food Inspection Agency said Thursday cows sick with ailments that are never diagnosed are allowed to enter the food chain each year.

Sylvie Farez said that while she did not know how many "downed," animals are killed in Canadian slaughterhouses each year, many of them are never tested to find out what's wrong with them.

"You cannot test them all, because there are too many," she said.

But Liz White, of the animal-protection group Animal Alliance of Canada, said the number could be in the thousands.

A cow is considered downed if it is not able to enter a slaughterhouse on its own power. In that case, it is allowed to be dragged from a transport truck with a chain.

Michael Hansen, a U.S. biologist with a special interest in mad cow disease, said that's outrageous, and that no downed animals should ever be allowed to enter the human food chain.

"It's wrong," Hansen said. "It should never happen."

Michael McBane, executive director of the Canadian Health Coalition, a watchdog group that monitors Canadian health issues, said even animals that are deemed not fit for human consumption and are sent to rendering plants end up in the food chain because animal feed given to healthy animals is made from the carcasses of rendered sick ones.

"It does enter the food system," McBane said. "So either the agriculture ministry is ignorant of the rendering process, or it's misleading Canadians. Either way it's unacceptable."

---

**Note: In another article ("Quarantines Spread Across 3 Provinces: Safeguards on Feed Open to Misuse," Calgary Herald/May 24), Alberta's Chief Veterinarian, Gerald Ollis, admitted to media that :**

"A Downer animal, yes, could be construed as an animal showing signs of BSE, but that's not what you usually see."