

# 'Smart Regulation' seen as weakening food, drug and environmental standards

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OTTAWA (CP) - Ottawa's newly launched "smart regulation" initiative will lead to a loss of sovereignty and widespread adoption of U.S. standards for food, drug and environmental safety, critics say.

The smart regulation program revealed by Treasury Board President Reg Alcock last week has received relatively little debate, perhaps because it is so technical, but critics say it has far-reaching implications.

"The belief by Canadians that government should protect their health, safety and environment against the drive to accumulate wealth is under siege," said David Coon, policy director of the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, in a recent letter to his members. "This assault on the public good is described as 'smart regulation.' "

In the next three to five years, Alcock's office plans a sweeping review of the rules governing how crops are grown, how foods are labelled, how drugs are approved and how industrial projects are assessed for environmental impact. The review is largely based on recommendations by an advisory committee established in 2003.

Its report, given to Prime Minister Paul Martin last September, called for a reduction in the number of made-in-Canada regulations. "The emergence of global markets and the need to co-operate in managing international problems means that country-specific solutions are increasingly less effective," says the report. "Canada should develop its own regulatory requirements only when they are necessary in order to meet national goals and values."

The report did not attempt to define these goals and values. It also says that "if the approach of key trading partners meets Canadian standards for protection, their approach should be adopted."

In practice, that will mean the widespread adoption of U.S. standards, critics say. That could have a major impact on such questions as the commercial sale of genetically engineered fish or the future shape of agriculture.

"Adopting of the American regulatory system would favour the industrial livestock production over the family farm," said Cathy Holtslander of the Saskatchewan-based Beyond Family Farming Coalition.

"A regulatory system skewed towards high-speed processing, centralization, high technology, expensive input fees and capital requirements will have negative impact on the rural economy by concentrating meat and livestock production around a few large packing plants."

She notes that in the past Canada has chosen a different regulatory approach from that of the United States - for example, in refusing to permit the use of bovine growth hormone to enhance milk production in dairy cows.

Such differences in approach will become difficult with smart regulation, she and others suggest. "Canadian regulations will increasingly be aligned with American ones to facilitate the so-called deep integration of Canada's economy with America's," says Coon.

Alcock has said Canada's regulatory system has "served us well" but needs to be updated.