

Chapter 41

Agriculture and Health – Regulating Meat Safety

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Unlike other provinces, in Saskatchewan, two ministries (the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health) are responsible for meat safety. Both ministries must inspect slaughter plants under their purview, with each having different standards for inspections. The Ministry of Agriculture (Agriculture) is also responsible for inspecting meat produced at slaughter plants it licenses.

Our *2012 Report – Volume 2* raised concerns about the lack of a consistent approach to meat safety and noted an increased risk of unsafe meat being produced in Saskatchewan. We made 10 recommendations to improve processes over regulating meat safety.

Since our audit, both ministries have made improvements. They have jointly identified meat inspection-related risks and developed action plans to mitigate these risks. Both ministries give the public information about slaughter plants that they each license. Since July 2014, Agriculture has had new standards with respect to regulating meat production, and has provided better reports to its senior management on the results of its meat regulatory activities. The Ministry of Health (Health) is working on amending regulations related to meat production, and is looking at implementing a new database to help it better track and report on the results of its inspections and regulatory activities. However, Health needs to develop and approve sanitation standards related to meat production and improve how it oversees inspections of slaughter plants that regional health authorities conduct.

Without these changes the risk continues that meat inspections may not be carried out to the same standards.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Our *2012 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 33 reported on whether the Ministries of Health and Agriculture had effective processes to regulate the production of meat that is safe for human consumption. We concluded that the Government of Saskatchewan, Agriculture and Health needed to strengthen their processes that help keep meat safe in Saskatchewan. We made 10 recommendations, one for the Government of Saskatchewan, three for the Ministry of Agriculture, and six for the Ministry of Health.

To conduct this review engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance*. To evaluate Agriculture's and Health's progress towards meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Agriculture's and Health's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.



3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation, the status of each recommendation as of September 30, 2014, and management's actions up to that date.

3.1 Saskatchewan Legislation Regulating Meat Safety Being Assessed

We recommended that the Government of Saskatchewan formally assess the risks related to uninspected meat and consider updating its regulations for the production of meat that is safe for human consumption. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Partially Implemented

As reported in our *2012 Report – Volume 2*, provincial governments are responsible for regulating meat safety within each province. Saskatchewan is the only province in Canada that assigns this responsibility to two different ministries. Having two ministries responsible for this task increases the risk that the Government will not know how many animals are slaughtered in the province or how much meat enters the food chain without being inspected. Health's regulations do not require reporting on the number of animals slaughtered at each plant, whereas Agriculture's does. Having two different ministries responsible – one of which uses internal staff¹ to conduct inspections and the other which uses a third party – increases the risk that inspections may not be conducted to the same standard.

Both Health and Agriculture are each responsible for ensuring slaughter plants under their purview are inspected. To inspect these facilities, Health uses public health inspectors employed by the regional health authorities, whereas Agriculture relies on third-party inspectors. Agriculture is also responsible for inspecting the meat produced at the slaughter plants it licenses.

Since our audit, Health and Agriculture have consulted one another and have created a list of inspection-related risks to examine further. Planned actions include reviewing its inspection standards, determining the amount of meat consumed in the province that has not been inspected, and tracking any communicable diseases as a result of contaminated meat.

Health is working on regulation amendments related to meat production to enhance the existing *Food Safety Regulations* that deal with food production. Health anticipates that the revised regulations will be in place in 2015.

¹ Internal staff are public health inspectors at regional health authorities.

3.2 Agriculture Standards for Regulating Meat Updated

We recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture review its standards for regulating meat production and formally approve them. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Implemented

In December 2013, the federal government stopped providing Saskatchewan with inspection services that helped Agriculture enforce provincial regulations. Therefore, it is important for Agriculture to review and approve standards for regulatory meat production to ensure all parties involved in the meat production process (e.g., operators, regulators and inspectors) understand the processes to follow when preparing meat for human consumption.

Since our audit, Agriculture worked with various parties (e.g., industry, other jurisdictions) to create a new standard to ensure humane slaughter of animals and production of safe meat products. The new standard outlines the detailed requirements and expectations for meat establishments inspected under the Domestic Meat Inspection Program. On July 30, 2014, Agriculture approved its Domestic Meat Inspection Program Standard.

3.3 Agriculture–Reporting of Inspection Results Improved

We recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture update its public website to include a list of all the slaughter plants registered in the Saskatchewan Domestic Meat Inspection Program. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Implemented

Allowing the public access to an online listing of slaughter plants registered under the Saskatchewan Domestic Meat Inspection Program provides the public with information about which slaughter plants are licensed.² It also provides the public with contact information for slaughter plant owners, should they have any questions or concerns.

Since our audit, Agriculture updated its website to include a listing of the 11 slaughter plants for which it is responsible. This listing includes the names of owners of the plant, as well as contact information.

² www.agriculture.gov.sk.ca/Meat-Inspection-Program (22 October 2014).



We recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture provide a report quarterly to its senior management on the causes of sanitation problems in slaughter plants and actions taken to enforce *The Regulations Governing the Inspection of Meat in Domestic Abattoirs, 1968*. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Implemented

Written reporting is essential for senior management to make informed decisions that impact the inspection and regulation of slaughter plants. Written information also provides a permanent record of the history of inspection results of slaughter plant inspections. Such records are important when experienced staff leave the organization.

In April 2013, Agriculture began providing quarterly reports to its senior management. The reports include information on any major non-compliance found during inspections at each slaughter plant, a listing of the slaughter plants registered under the Domestic Meat Inspection Program, a schedule of payments provided to the third party for meat inspection services, and trend information on the number of animals slaughtered.

3.4 Health–Standards for Sanitation in Slaughter Plants Being Assessed

We recommended that the Ministry of Health, consulting with the Ministry of Agriculture and regional health authorities, develop and approve detailed sanitation standards for slaughter plant operations. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Partially Implemented

Not having specific, written standards that are readily available makes it difficult for slaughter plants to produce meat that is safe, and increases the difficulty for regional health inspectors to effectively inspect slaughter plants.

At September 2014, Health indicated that it was working on new slaughter plant provisions to be incorporated into *The Food Safety Regulations* and was creating standards to accompany the revised regulations. Health expects to complete this work in 2015. Health is consulting with Agriculture and the regional health authorities in order to develop slaughter plant standards to ensure the safety of meat. It expects these standards to include equipment cleaning procedures and required temperature control of storage to help ensure the safety of meat. Health expects these standards, once finalized and approved, will help operators meet the incoming regulations.

3.5 Health–Regional Health Authorities Not Adequately Monitored

We recommended that the Ministry of Health obtain more information to help it assess risks to meat safety, including the number of animals slaughtered, in slaughter plants licensed under *The Sanitation Regulations, 1964*. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Partially Implemented

For Health to assess meat safety risks related to the slaughter plants it licences, Health needs current information on various risk factors including the number of domestic and wild animals being processed. It also needs to know if different types of animals are processed at the same plant, the general location of sales to the public, and the general magnitude of the plant's operations. Health does not regularly receive this information from regional health authorities or from the slaughter plant operators.

Without this information, Health cannot effectively oversee the enforcement of *The Sanitation Regulations, 1964*. *The Sanitation Regulations, 1964* are intended to prevent the spread of communicable diseases from licensed slaughter plants.

In 2012, Health, through a survey of the slaughter plants it licenced, collected information on the types and volume of domestic animals slaughtered, whether wild animals are processed, the general location of sales, and the number of operating days and slaughtering days per year at these facilities. Staff analyzed the results and reported the findings to senior management. At September 2014, Health was considering changing its licensing requirements to require licensees to provide this type of information annually in the future.

We recommended that the Ministry of Health confirm that regional health authorities take appropriate action to ensure that high and medium risk slaughter plants correct identified problems that could reduce the safety of the meat produced. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Partially Implemented

Without appropriate corrective action, slaughter plants could produce meat that is not safe for human consumption. This could result in people becoming ill due to how the meat was processed or slaughtered.

Health's inspections tracking system does not provide any details on the deficiencies found in the inspections (see **Figure 1**), the enforcement action taken by the regional health authorities, or actions taken to correct them. Without this information, Health is not able to confirm that the regional health authorities have taken appropriate action.

**Figure 1 – Health's Inspection Rating System**

Consistent with our 2012 audit, Health assigns a rating to each Health-licensed facility that is based on its re-inspection priority, rather than how likely the facility is to produce meat that is contaminated. If public health inspectors at the regional health authorities (inspectors) determine that a Health-licensed facility is producing meat that is not safe to eat, they cancel the operator's license and order the facility to close. If inspectors identify deficiencies on a standard inspection form when inspecting Health-licensed facilities, they rate the facility as high, medium, or low risk of producing meat that is not safe to eat. The high or medium rating means that the inspector will inspect the facility more frequently.

Health expects to implement a new database in spring 2015. It expects this system will capture more information on the deficiencies found in the inspections, the enforcement actions taken by the regional health authorities, and allow for a more in-depth analysis at the regional health authority level.

Health uses its tracking system to determine whether inspectors are performing their inspections and re-inspections within the specified timeframes. In its 2013-14 reports provided to management, it was noted that eight facilities were not inspected within the required timeframes. In these cases, Health asked the regional health authorities why the inspections were not completed on time and requested an inspection be done if the facility was not closed.

We recommended that the Ministry of Health analyze regional trends in public complaints about slaughter plants and/or contaminated meat. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Partially Implemented

Monitoring complaints from the public can provide an early alert that sanitation practices have not been maintained at the level observed during an annual inspection. Analysis of complaints can provide insight into changes needed in the meat safety program.

Since our 2012 audit, Health has implemented a complaint tracking system within the Ministry and has received one complaint directly about a Health-licensed facility. This complaint related to improper disposal of animal waste from the slaughter plant. In this instance, Health contacted the health region to follow up with the facility. The matter was resolved within three days.

Health information management systems do not track inquiries or complaints about slaughter plants made to the regional health authorities. Health needs this information to analyze regional trends in public complaints about slaughter plants and/or contaminated meat.

As noted previously, Health expects to implement a new electronic database in spring 2015. It expects to use this system to track public complaints about slaughter plants and/or contaminated meat and to perform more in-depth analysis at the regional health authority level.

3.6 Health-Reporting of Inspection Results Improving

We recommended that the Ministry of Health update its public website to include the inspection results for all slaughter plants licensed under *The Sanitation Regulations, 1964*. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Partially Implemented

Publicly-posted license information and inspection results are an efficient way for the public to be assured that a plant was inspected and was deemed suitable at the time of inspection. This provides increased public confidence. Since our audit, Health has posted on its website a listing of all of the Health-licensed slaughter plants, along with the name of the facility's operator. Because *The Public Health Act, 1994* does not provide for public disclosure of slaughter plant inspection results, Health is considering changes to the law to provide for public disclosure.

We recommended that the Ministry of Health provide a summary report quarterly to its senior management on the causes of sanitation problems arising at slaughter plants and the actions taken to enforce *The Sanitation Regulations, 1964*. (2012 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee has not yet considered this recommendation)

Status – Partially Implemented

Written reports are essential for senior management to make informed decisions that impact the inspection and regulation of slaughter plants. Written information also provides a permanent record of the history of inspection results. Such records are important when experienced staff leave the organization. Reporting to management is important so that management knows each slaughter plant received the proper attention from Health during any given year.

In 2014, Health provided a report to senior management covering its 2013 activities. The report provided inspection statistics, indicated that there were no reported incidences of food-borne illnesses, described the common deficiencies found during inspections, and compared those findings to historical trends. As Health does not collect information on the actions taken by the regional health authorities to enforce *The Sanitation Regulations, 1964*, the report does not include this information.

