

Chapter 35

Health and Agriculture—Regulating Meat Safety

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Since 2014 (the time of our last follow up), the Ministry of Health improved some of its regulatory meat safety processes related to the 66 health-licensed slaughter plants; but more work remains. In Saskatchewan, unlike other provinces, two ministries (the ministries of Health and Agriculture) are responsible for regulating meat safety.

As of September 2017, the Government of Saskatchewan was considering a unified meat inspection system where one Ministry would regulate all provincially licensed slaughter plants.

By September 2017, Health had fully implemented three recommendations and made progress on three others. Health surveyed provincially licensed slaughter plants to determine the number and types of animals slaughtered, implemented a new data management system to help it analyze trends in complaints, and began providing reports to senior management on the number of inspections performed and common deficiencies found during inspections.

Health still needs to approve its draft slaughter plant standards, monitor inspections performed by health authority inspectors, and establish regulations allowing the results of inspections to be released publicly.

Without making progress on the outstanding recommendations, the risk continues that meat inspections may not be carried out to the same standards as agriculture-licensed slaughter plants, resulting in unsafe meat.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

In Saskatchewan, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the ministries of Health and Agriculture are responsible for meat safety. The Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health (through the regional health authorities) regulate slaughter plants using different regulations and standards for inspection. Agriculture inspects meat produced at slaughter plants it licenses.

Our *2012 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 33 raised concerns about the Government’s lack of a consistent approach to regulating meat safety and noted an increased risk of unsafe meat being produced in Saskatchewan. Our 2012 audit concluded the Government of Saskatchewan, and the ministries of Agriculture and Health needed to strengthen their processes that help keep meat safe in Saskatchewan. It included ten recommendations— one directed to the Government of Saskatchewan, three to the Ministry of Agriculture, and six to the Ministry of Health. By September 30, 2014, the Government of Saskatchewan had partially implemented its recommendation, Agriculture had fully implemented its three recommendations, and Health had partially implemented its six recommendations.¹

¹ See our *2014 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 41.



This chapter reports the results of our second follow-up. To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance* (including CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Government of Saskatchewan and Health’s progress towards meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Health’s management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To do this audit, we examined the results of surveys of provincially licensed slaughter plants sent to the Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Health Authority licensed slaughter plants, reviewed draft regulations, assessed changes to policy, observed changes to Health’s IT system, assessed reporting provided to senior management, and had discussions with management.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at September 15, 2017, and management’s actions up to that date. We found that Health had implemented three recommendations and made progress on the remaining recommendations reported in our *2014 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 41. The Government of Saskatchewan also made progress on its recommendation.

3.1 Changes in Regulating Meat Safety Under Consideration

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 agreement February 12, 2015)

Status – Partially Implemented

Since our 2014 follow-up, the Saskatchewan Government is considering moving towards a unified system where one ministry (e.g., the Ministry of Agriculture) would regulate the Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Health Authority licensed slaughter plants. It expects to decide in 2017-18. Until then, regulatory changes about the safety of meat under consideration were on hold.

At September 2017, the ministries of Health and Agriculture each remained responsible for ensuring slaughter plants under their responsibility 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 responsible for inspecting the meat produced at the slaughter plants it licenses. At September 2017, 80 health-licensed and 10 agriculture-licensed facilities that process meat operate in Saskatchewan. In addition, some facilities are regulated federally.

Using 2012 data, Health estimates that at least one-tenth of beef and about one-twentieth of pork consumed in Saskatchewan is not inspected (it did not estimate the extent of uninspected poultry consumed). Health officials scanned the provincial public health notifiable disease tracking database and did not find a correlation between health-licensed slaughter plants and cause of illness.

Saskatchewan does not regulate meat sold by farmers to consumers (i.e., farm gate). We note some other jurisdictions do. For example, in Alberta, if you wish to sell your meat at the farm gate; from your farm store; to restaurants, institutions, and public markets; or online, you will require a food-handling permit for the storage and transport of the meat to your customers. If you handle, repackage, portion, or cut any unwrapped product, then these actions are considered to be processing. To process, you require a distinctly separate area of your home or farm that will be considered a food establishment, and this area must meet all Alberta Health Services requirements.²

As reported in our *2012 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 33, 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. As each ministry has different regulations and requirements on reporting, having two different ministries responsible increases the risk that inspections may not be conducted to the same standard. In addition, the Government must ensure its regulatory framework appropriately addresses risks related to uninspected meat consumed in Saskatchewan.

3.2 Better Information Gathered to Assess Risks to Meat Safety

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 agreement February 12, 2015)

Status – Implemented

Health has gathered additional information to help it assess risks to meat safety.

In the fall of 2016, the ministries of Agriculture and Health surveyed the 90 Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Health Authority licensed slaughter plants in operation at the time; 60 plants responded. The survey results provided information on the nature of processing activities; the scope and volume of meat slaughtered and processed; and the plants' size, age, and future plans. Respondents cited concerns about farm gate sales of meat, and expressed varying views about changing the inspection of facilities that process meat.

² [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex15139](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex15139) (30 September 2017).



In addition, in 2015, Health gathered information about regulatory activities of other provincial provinces. It was using this information to consider changes to Saskatchewan's regulatory regime for meat safety.

3.3 Revised Sanitation Standards Under Consideration

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 agreement February 12, 2015)

Status – Partially Implemented

As of September 2017, while Health had drafted detailed slaughter plant sanitation standards, they remain draft given the Government's pending decision about making one ministry solely responsible for meat safety at provincially-licensed slaughter plants.

Not having specific, approved, 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.

3.4 Further Monitoring of Slaughter-plant Inspections Needed

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 agreement February 12, 2015)

Status – Partially Implemented

We recommended that the Ministry of Health analyze trends in public complaints about slaughter plants and/or contaminated meat. (2012 Report

– Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 12, 2015)

Status – Implemented

As of September 2017, although Health tracks inspections that authorities completed, it was not actively monitoring whether slaughter plants corrected identified deficiencies as and when recommended. Health provided slaughter-plant inspectors with clearer guidance on handling identified deficiencies.

In spring of 2017, Health implemented Standard Operating Procedures for inspectors of health-licensed facilities including slaughter plants. Staff of regional health authorities complete these inspections. Health's new procedures set out, in detail, how to proceed with deficiencies found at slaughter plants, including corrective actions to recommend. The procedures provide a consistent course of action for inspectors to take when finding deficiencies during inspections of health-licensed slaughter plants.

In 2015, Health implemented a new data management IT system. Both Health officials and relevant officials from regional health authorities have access to this system. The system tracks key information on inspections of health-licensed facilities that process meat. This includes the name of the inspecting authority (e.g., Saskatoon), name of licensed plant/facility, the risk ranking of the facility (e.g., high, moderate, low), date of inspection, and findings from previous inspections.

Also, the new system tracks complaints received on food safety and slaughter plants. As of September 2017, Health had not received any complaints related to slaughter plants.

By September 2017, Health's monitoring of slaughter-plant inspections by authorities was limited to routinely reviewing the number of inspections each authority completed as compared to number of licensed facilities in their region, and the top five sanitation deficiencies noted in health-licensed slaughter plants. Senior Health officials reviewed this information quarterly. However, it did not monitor whether slaughter plants corrected identified deficiencies as and when recommended, and the nature and extent of uncorrected deficiencies at plants that process larger volumes of meat.

Inspectors can withhold licences if a slaughter plant does not comply with recommendations to fix deficiencies noted. Since the implementation of the Standard Operating Procedures in spring 2017, inspectors have not withheld any licences.

Without appropriate and timely 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.

3.5 Reporting of Inspection Results Improving But Results Not Public

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 agreement February 12, 2015)

Status – Implemented

With the implementation of Health's new data management system in 2015, Health provides senior management with quarterly reports about inspections of health-licensed facilities. These reports include information on the number of inspections done and the top five sanitation deficiencies that regional health authorities found during inspections (e.g., deficiencies related to handwashing stations at facilities).

Health indicated that it is using the information tracked in the system when considering changes to its regulation of health-licensed facilities that process meat.

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 addition, it helps senior management determine whether its regulatory activities of slaughter plants are sufficient and appropriate.



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 agreement February 12, 2015)

Status – Partially Implemented

In November 2016, changes to *The Public Health Act, 1994* allowed for the introduction of regulations to publicly disclose inspection reports of regulated facilities (which includes slaughter plants). At September 2017, the Government had not issued regulations to allow public reporting on the inspection results of health-licensed slaughter plants.

Health advised us that it is awaiting the Government's decision about whether to make one ministry responsible for inspecting provincially licensed facilities processing meat before proposing regulations about public reporting of inspection results.

Publicly-posted licence information and inspection results are an efficient way for the public to be assured that a plant was inspected and deemed suitable at the time of inspection. This provides increased public confidence that meat is safe to consume.