

Chapter 36

Health—Meat Safety

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Since 2017 (the time of our last follow up), the Ministry of Health improved its regulatory meat safety processes related to 77 Health-licensed slaughter plants. In Saskatchewan, unlike in other provinces, two ministries (the Ministries of Health and Agriculture) are responsible for regulating meat safety.

As of July 2019, Health fully implemented the remaining four recommendations. It finalized and approved slaughter plant standards, revised the *Food Safety Regulations* to include slaughter plants, allowed for the online posting of inspection results, and began running reports of overdue follow-up inspections.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

In Saskatchewan, two ministries are responsible by law for regulating the production of meat safe for human consumption—the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture.

Our *2012 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 33, concluded that, for the period from September 1, 2011 to August 31, 2012, 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 10 recommendations—one directed to the Government of Saskatchewan, three to the Ministry of Agriculture, and six to the Ministry of Health.¹ By September 2017, the Government of Saskatchewan partially implemented its recommendation, the Ministry of Agriculture fully implemented its three recommendations, and the Ministry of Health implemented three of six recommendations.²

This chapter describes the results of our third follow-up of the actions of the Government of Saskatchewan on its remaining recommendation and Health on its outstanding three recommendations.

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Government of Saskatchewan and Health's progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Health's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

Our audit approach primarily included examining Health's standards relevant to slaughter plants and discussing them with management. We tested a sample of inspections of high and medium risk slaughter plants to assess whether follow-up inspections occurred promptly and assessed whether Health posted the inspections' results to its website.

¹ Find the original report regarding these recommendations at www.auditor.sk.ca/publications/public-reports. We reported the original audit work in *2012 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 33, pp. 279–294.

² In *2017 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 35, pp. 247–252.



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 July 31, 2019, and the Ministry of Health's actions up to that date.

3.1 Decisions Made for Provincial Regulation of Meat Safety

We recommended 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, p. 284, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 12, 2015)

Status—Implemented

Since our 2017 follow-up, the Government of Saskatchewan decided not to unify the regulation of slaughter plants in the province to one Ministry. Health indicated this decision resulted because of the potential costs to the industry (i.e., bringing slaughter plants up to the Ministry of Agriculture's standards), costs to government and no evidence of food-borne illnesses from Health-regulated slaughter plants. As a result, the Government revised its *Food Safety Regulations* to include health regulated slaughter plants.

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 whose regulatory responsibilities differ.

The Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for administering a voluntary meat inspection program to its licensed slaughter plants. This program inspects the safety of meat by inspecting animals antemortem, post-mortem and facility inspections.³ The Ministry of Health is responsible for inspecting the sanitation of smaller slaughter plants; it does not inspect the health of the animals.

Health indicated it does not view farm gate sales (e.g., meat sold directly by farmers for consumption) as falling within the scope of smaller slaughter plants as long as customers pick up the meat directly from a farm's preparation facility or by other means that Health considers appropriate (e.g., repeat customer where the farmer delivers the meat). However, it has not documented this activity in policy or legislation, or routinely monitored for compliance. Health will respond to food safety complaints surrounding farm gate sales.

We found an instance of a website allowing customers to purchase farm gate meat with producer delivery to a customer's home. This does not follow the province's current, informal rules for farm gate meat.

³ Antemortem means prior to death. Post-mortem means after death.

Health's legislation states that all people who prepare and sell food/drink must do so in a manner that is safe for human consumption.⁴ This would include farm gate sales. Therefore, farmers are legally responsible for ensuring meat sold to the public is safe to consume.

3.2 Slaughter Plant Standards Finalized and Approved

We recommended 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, p.290, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 12, 2015)

Status—Implemented

In October 2018, Health finalized and approved its Slaughter Plant Standards (i.e., provides guidance to slaughter plant operators on how to safely handle and prepare meat for human consumption). While not as detailed, these standards are consistent with Agriculture's Domestic Meat Inspection Standards.

Having specific, approved, written standards readily accessible helps slaughter plants to produce meat that is safe, and allows regional health inspectors to inspect slaughter plants effectively.

3.3 Monitoring of Overdue Slaughter Plant Inspections Reasonable

We recommended the Ministry of Health confirm 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, p. 292, Recommendation 7; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 12, 2015)

Status—Implemented

Since our 2017 follow-up, Health began monitoring the timeliness of the public health inspectors follow-up of deviations (problems) identified in previous inspections of slaughter plants.

Annually, management runs reports of overdue inspections. We found the report run in July 2019 listed only two slaughter plants overdue for inspection, and Health reminded public health inspectors of those overdue inspections. At July 2019, Health was responsible for inspecting 77 slaughter plants.

Health sets re-inspection frequency based on the risk-rating assigned to a facility from deviations public health inspectors find in inspections. For a low rating, it requires annual re-inspection, and for moderate and high ratings, it requires re-inspection within six months or one month, respectively.

⁴ The Public Health Act s.16 and The Food Safety Regulations s.19.



Health allows progressive action on slaughter plants not addressing high-rated deviations, but does not track instances of progressive action.⁵ It expects public health inspectors to do so. Slaughter plants that continue not to correct identified deviations can lose their operating license or be issued a temporary operating license.

Our audit work found public health inspectors followed up, within a reasonable timeframe, on identified problems at facilities rated as moderate or high risk.

Taking appropriate and timely corrective action ensures slaughter plants produce meat that is safe for human consumption.

3.4 Slaughter Plant Inspection Results Made Public

We recommended 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, p. 293, Recommendation 9; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 12, 2015)

Status—Implemented

In October 2018, the Government updated its *Food Safety Regulations* to allow for public reporting of Health's results of inspections of slaughter plants.

For 16 inspection reports tested, we found Health posted the most current inspection results to its website.⁶

Publicly posted inspection results serve as an efficient way to gain public assurance that Health inspected a slaughter plant and deemed it suitable at the time of inspection. This increases public confidence that meat is safe to consume.

⁵ Progressive action refers to the health inspectors' ability to apply different tactics to gain compliance (e.g., perform re-inspections, escalate to issuing temporary license to operate until compliance achieved, suspend operating license).

⁶ www.healthinspections.saskatchewan.ca/SlaughterPlants/Map (09 October 2019).

