

National Office
2717 Wentz Ave.
Saskatoon, Sask.
S7K 4B6
Tel (306) 652-9465
Fax (306) 664-6226
E-Mail: nfu@nfu.ca



national farmers union
In Union Is Strength

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OCTOBER 10, 2008

FOOD SAFETY WATCHDOG NEEDS TO TAKE LEADING ROLE, SAYS NFU

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) should be taking the lead role in alerting Canadians about confirmed cases of contamination in the food supply, rather than relinquishing that responsibility to privately-owned multinational corporations, says the National Farmers Union (NFU).

Jan Slomp, NFU Alberta Coordinator, said it is highly unusual that Michael McCain, President of Maple Leaf Foods, should be the main spokesperson on the issue of listeria-contaminated food products originating in one of his company's processing facilities. "That should be the role of the publicly-accountable food safety watchdog," stated Slomp. He noted the CFIA's role appears to be one of "confirmation after the fact." This situation, he says, is a reversal of the normal protocol. "It appears to reflect the Harper government's conviction that food processing companies should be self-policing when it comes to food safety," added Slomp. "The sad truth is that deregulation puts Canadians at risk."

Slomp noted that the CFIA should not appear to be unduly cozy with large multinational corporations, as they must apply food safety rules equally to all facilities – including smaller operations that are locally-owned and operated.

Grant Robertson, NFU Ontario Coordinator, said Canadians have a right to information that is free from any perception of conflict-of-interest. "The CFIA's primary role should be to ensure the public interest is protected," said Robertson. "Information concerning food safety must be timely and accurate." He added the CFIA's role "should not be coloured by perceived partisan political or commercial interests. Often CFIA seems to not extend this 'hands off' approach to smaller processors and others in the food chain."

The latest incidence of listeria-contaminated meat was made public October 8 when four product tests at a Maple Leaf plant in Toronto came back positive for listeria. This is the same plant that was at the heart of a nation-wide listeriosis outbreak earlier this year which contributed to the deaths of 20 Canadians. While the CFIA confirmed the test results on its website late in the day on October 8, the first announcement was made by the President of Maple Leaf Foods several hours earlier.

The NFU has been critical of the Harper government's moves to deregulate and cut back on food safety programs, and has called for the resignation of Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz over his handling of the listeriosis crisis earlier this year.

- 30 -

Jan Slomp, NFU Alberta Coordinator (403) 843-2068

Grant Robertson, NFU Ontario Coordinator (519) 386-1904 or (519) 353-4033

Terry Pugh, NFU Executive-Secretary (306) 652-9465