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national farmers union

In Union Is Strength

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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RITZ MUST RESIGN OVER CALLOUS COMMENTS ON LISTERIOSIS

The National Farmers Union (NFU) has joined the call for the resignation of federal Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz over his callous and hurtful remarks about listeriosis and the tragic deaths of many Canadians from eating tainted meat.

Ritz's comments, courageously leaked to the press September 17, occurred during a conference call last August with scientists who were briefing government officials on the extent of the listeriosis outbreak. Ritz made disparaging jokes, including a death wish for Liberal MP Wayne Easter, and seemed far more concerned about the potential political fallout to the Harper Government than about the actual health threat to the people of Canada.

At one point on the call, Ritz fretted about the political implications for the Harper Government on the eve of the election call: "This is like a death by a thousand cuts. Or should I say cold cuts," he is quoted as saying in the Canadian Press.

NFU Ontario Coordinator Grant Robertson said the comments by the Agriculture Minister reflect the skewed priorities of the Harper Government. "This is a government that has worked steadily to undermine the role of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) as a public watchdog," stated Robertson. "Harper has cut funding for food safety programs and shifted responsibility for monitoring compliance with safety standards to the food companies themselves."

Robertson noted the federal Treasury Board forecasts funding for food safety programs to decline by nearly 30 percent from \$359 million in 2006-07 to \$254 million in 2010-2011 – all under the Harper administration. Meanwhile, a secret government document was recently leaked which revealed plans to "shift from full-time CFIA meat inspection presence to an oversight role, allowing industry to implement food safety control programs and to manage key risks" and "eliminate federal delivery of provincial meat inspection programs" in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and BC. It was only the outbreak of the listeriosis crisis which brought these plans to light. The efforts of the Agriculture Union of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), which represents CFIA inspectors, have been of tremendous importance in highlighting the Harper Government's undermining of food safety standards in Canada, he stated.

Since March 31, 2008, CFIA meat inspectors are now directly supervising from the plant floor only 25% of the time, with the rest of their time devoted to reviewing company-generated reports. The Harper government has also prevented CFIA inspectors from taking direct action when serious health problems arise, instead they are directed to give the offending company a 60-day “corrective action request.” Finally, when the Harper Government took office in 2006, it phased out the reporting and ranking of meat processing facilities inspected by the CFIA.

Robertson concluded that Ritz’s comments are destructive to everyone, including family farmers. “There has got to be a better direction for Canada,” he said. “And perhaps a better Canadian direction starts with the resignation of Gerry Ritz.”

- 30 -

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