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AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Canadian Food Inspection Agency—
Shortage of Inspectors—Food Safety

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Thursday, April 2, 2015

THE SENATE

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[*Translation*]

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CANADIAN FOOD INSPECTION AGENCY— SHORTAGE OF INSPECTORS— FOOD SAFETY

Hon. Claudette Tardif: Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

On March 31, 2015, the Agriculture Union sounded the alarm regarding the unraveling of food safety measures because of a shortage of inspectors at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

[*English*]

During a news conference in Edmonton, the president of the Agriculture Union, which represents Canada's meat inspectors, indicated that a critical shortage of inspectors is putting the safety of consumers at risk across the country. Only 12 of 18 meat hygiene inspection positions are filled at processing plants in northern Alberta. The numbers are the same in the Calgary region. He stated:

This government has a lot to say about protecting Canadians. And I'm hoping they realize that these are more than just numbers on paper,

There's lives at risk — a real likelihood that people are going to die. . . .

He also explained that some inspectors are worried sick about declining safety standards. He stated:

They just can't take the pressure anymore.

[*Translation*]

According to Mr. Kingston, the union has been raising the issue of the shortfalls in the inspection sector for over a year now. Instead of filling the vacant inspector positions, the government has decided to reduce inspection activities.

Leader, how can the government guarantee the well-being of Canadians under these conditions?

Hon. Claude Carignan (Leader of the Government): Thank you, senator, for your question. I would like to emphasize that the Conference Board of Canada rates our food safety system number one against 17 OECD countries, including the U.S. Furthermore, as Minister Ambrose has pointed out, the union's portrayal of this issue is inaccurate.

• (1350)

They are undermining public confidence in food safety. It is irresponsible. As I have said before, the funding allocated to food safety remains among the highest in the history of Canada. I

would remind honourable senators that Economic Action Plan 2014 provides for the hiring of an additional 200 front-line food safety inspectors. As you know, senator, and the union is well aware of this too, the procedures for exports are different, for reasons related to trade and not to safety, when we are talking about things like certification, labelling or classification of cuts and grades. I think we need to set the record straight.

[*English*]

Senator Tardif: In 2013, the federal government promised to strengthen the food safety system after an E. coli outbreak at the XL Foods plant in Brooks, Alberta, which sickened 18 people and led to the largest beef recall in Canadian history.

Let us not forget the listeria outbreak in 2008, in which 22 people died after eating contaminated deli food meats from a Maple Leaf Foods plant in Toronto.

The Weatherill report, which came out in 2009, cited a shortage of inspectors and an absence of training as factors that contributed to the Maple Leaf Foods disaster.

In the words of Marianne Hladun, the Prairies Regional Executive Vice-President for the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the government may have forgotten the consequences of the Maple Leaf tragedy, but Canadians have not.

Why is the government, in all conscience, not following the recommendations the Weatherill report put forward and rolling back on measures to verify the sanitation of meat production facilities?

[*Translation*]

Senator Carignan: Senator, our government strengthened the food safety system and will continue to do so through the Safe Food for Canadians Action Plan that we implemented. As part of the plan, we are implementing stiffer penalties and better screening for E. coli. We are imposing new meat labelling requirements and taking measures to counter the import of unsafe food. We have an action plan and we will continue to take action.

As I said, and it bears repeating, the Conference Board of Canada ranks our food safety assurance system the best in the 17 OECD countries, including the United States.

Senator Tardif: Leader, meat that is sold in Canada is subject to fewer inspection activities than meat that is sold in foreign markets. We are therefore protecting exporters at the expense of Canadians' health.

On January 2, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency instructed its staff in northern Alberta to cut general sanitation inspection by 50 per cent and pre-operation inspections by 30 per cent. The president of the food inspectors union said, and I quote:

With available resources, the only way the CFIA can meet American inspection standards in order to maintain access

to the US market is to shortchange inspection of meat for Canadian consumers. It's that simple.

Plants that process meat destined for the United States are inspected every 12 hours, while chicken plants in Edmonton are inspected just three times a week. Why is the government cutting spending and staffing for food safety, thus putting the health of Canadians in jeopardy?

Senator Carignan: As I just said in response to your first question, and as the union knows very well, the procedures for exports are different for reasons that are related strictly to trade and that have nothing to do with safety. I am talking about, for instance, certification, labelling or the classification of cuts and grades. I thought I was clear about that, senator.

Senator Tardif: The figures vary greatly between what you said and what the government is planning. According to the projections of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the government plans to reduce spending on food safety by 21 per cent in 2016-17. That represents a cut of \$78 million and involves the elimination of 548 jobs.

Furthermore, the agency has added responsibilities. It will have to regulate 10,000 food importers but will have fewer resources to do so. By reallocating resources to address international trade issues, the government could be compromising the safety of food within the country.

The government chose to reduce food safety inspections and, according to people working in the field, Canadians are now suffering the consequences of that choice.

Mr. Leader, this is a very serious situation. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency must have the resources it needs to ensure that food is safe in Canada. What will the government do and when will it fix this alarming situation?

Senator Carignan: There is something we must all agree on. The Conference Board of Canada rates our food safety system as number one out of 17 OECD countries.

I encourage you to be careful about endorsing the statements made by the union. As I said, the union's comments in this regard are inaccurate and they irresponsibly undermine the public's confidence in our food safety and food security. I encourage you to distance yourself from these statements.

I would like to remind honourable senators that the funding allocated to food safety remains at the highest level in Canadian history. Economic Action Plan 2014, which you voted against, provides for the hiring of an additional 200 front-line food safety inspectors.

Senator Tardif: According to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's projections, its budget will be cut by about \$78 million in 2016-17 and 548 positions will be eliminated. Are you claiming that these figures, which were released by the agency, are incorrect?

Senator Carignan: I am saying that Economic Action Plan 2014 provides for the hiring of an additional 200 front-line food safety inspectors. If the regulations governing the transportation and characteristics of exports, as well as the associated procedures, are different, it is for trade reasons, not safety reasons. I once again ask you to distance yourself from the statements and comments made by the union since they are inaccurate and, unfortunately, they irresponsibly undermine the public's confidence in our food system.

Senator Tardif: This data is not from the union, but rather from the Canada Food Inspection Agency's proposed budget. Are there 200 new inspector positions being created in addition to the 548 positions being eliminated?

• (1400)

Senator Carignan: Senator, as I said, Economic Action Plan 2014 provides for the hiring of an additional 200 front-line inspectors. I believe I was clear.
