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*Le sommaire des résultats est également disponible en français*

## Executive Summary

# CANADIANS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SAFETY OF CANADA'S FOOD SUPPLY



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## 1. BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

### *Background*

- This research was commissioned by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) to understand how Canadians view the safety of the country's food supply, to help the Agency:
  - Raise awareness of its roles and responsibilities, and promote the food safety systems that safeguard Canada's food supply.
  - Effectively position roles played by CFIA and the federal government in order to garner greater support for Canada's efforts.
  - Improve its communication and outreach efforts to consumers about food safety issues through multi-media communication products, and collaboration with industry and stakeholder groups who directly interact with consumers.
  - Determine the type and tone of the information to be shared.
  - Update and validate existing quantitative data and inform future public opinion research.

### *Purpose*

- To explore existing perceptions related to the safety of Canada's food supply in four main areas: (1) awareness and knowledge, (2) attitudes and behaviours, (3) trust and concerns, and (4) information and communication.

### *Methodology*

- From November 24 to 29 2007, eight two-hour focus groups of six to eight participants were conducted in four Canadian cities from four different regions of the country with a total of 60 men and women aged 25-59 with a range of occupational, educational and ethnic backgrounds.
  - Two groups each were held in Calgary, Toronto, Halifax (English) and Montreal (French). In each location, one group was very concerned about the safety of the food supply and the other was not.

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- Participants were recruited randomly by Createc, according to a client-approved recruitment screener created in both official languages, which stipulated, among other things, that all respondents were responsible for grocery shopping, and all included red meat in their diet. At least some in each group had children living at home.
  - All respondents received an incentive payment of \$50 at the end of their session.
  - Discussions in all eight groups generally followed the client-approved Discussion Guide.
    - The Interactive Workshop Method was used for the first half of each session. In each group, participants formed teams of two who collaborated on what they knew, believed and had heard about food safety in Canada (whether true or false), and what they wondered. Each team presented their deliberations to the group for discussion. With this method, a vast amount of unprompted information was generated by a total of 30 teams.

### ***Limitations***

- Note that qualitative research by nature is exploratory and cannot be extrapolated to any type of market or audience, without further validation. At best, qualitative research explores the range of views, and provides understanding of why such views exist.
  - The insights and suggestions obtained from the main shoppers who willingly participated in our study added considerable value to our understanding about their perceptions of and confidence in the safety of Canada's food supply.
  - However, the reader is advised that any statement non-factual in nature constitutes only current opinion, which is subject to change.
- Consequently, as in all qualitative research, and in accordance with the Code of Ethics and Standards of the Marketing Research Intelligence Association (MRIA), findings may or may not be representative of the target population at large.

## **2. OVERVIEW**

- Overall, research findings were quite consistent in all eight groups, across language, ethnicity, region, and confidence level.
- Food safety was and continues to be a topic of strong interest to participants, who demonstrated a strong motivation to understand various aspects. However, food safety issues were generally not top-of-mind, unless triggered by a recall or event.
- Overall, confidence in the safety of Canada's food supply was moderate and precarious.

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- Long-term effects from things like pesticides, chemicals, GMO, hormones in meat and dairy products, and the lingering worries about the impact of mad cow disease on the meat supply were a much greater concern than foodborne illness or food poisoning, which was considered unpleasant but short-term and low risk.
  - Besides cancer and serious food allergies, no other medical conditions or diseases—such as diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol—were discussed in relation to food safety. Some did mention salt and trans fats, salmonella, and E. coli, but there was much more concern about chemicals, antibiotics, growth hormones and pesticides.
    - The traditional concerns about food safety appear to have given place to newer unknown, long-term and more threatening issues.
  - When shopping, people reported increasing tendencies to read labels and look for reassurances with regard to both packaged and fresh foods. Those affected by food allergies made an even more stringent effort at label reading at point of purchase.
  - Because of concerns about the use of pesticides, antibiotic residues, colouring, etc., there was a strong interest in organic foods, perceived by many to be healthier because of safer growing and production practices.
    - However, many also questioned organic labelling as to what it meant, how monitored it was, how standards were established and by whom.
  - Participants in all groups were very willing to adopt safe food-handling practices at home, and some felt good that they were already doing this. Others wanted reassurance that they were on the right track.
  - People in this study, including those from Quebec, generally felt confident that the Canadian government was doing its job with regard to regulations and standards. They also generally believed Canadian standards are high.
    - However, participants demonstrated low awareness of what regulations exist, if and/or how they are complied with, and who is responsible for what, in terms of jurisdiction. For example, some Calgary people knew that the municipality was responsible for restaurant inspections, and people in Toronto knew the province was responsible for water safety, but this is likely because both issues were headlined due to safety and health issues.
    - Participants did not particularly care to know the specifics about regulations per se.
    - However, they did seem to care a lot and worry about inspection and compliance, on a local, regional, national and international level. Participants expressed many questions, doubts and uncertainties about the integrity of inspectors and the efficiency of the current food inspection system.

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- Participants said they relied on a wide range of media-generated information sources, including TV, Internet, newspapers, and radio, plus word-of-mouth from friends and family. However, there was little to no recall of specific information sources or information providers, whether Internet-based, printed, governmental or industry related. In addition, most food shoppers in the study did not seem to actively look for information on food safety, despite the seriousness of many of their concerns.
  - Generally, people seemed to trust the Canadian government to inform them about relevant food safety issues, with some mention of Health Canada as a reliable source.
    - In fact, there was a high degree of trust when it came to food alerts and/or recalls. People felt that by the time a public message was required, all doubts about the level of seriousness had been erased.
    - However, food recalls and/or alerts generally evoked conflicting reactions.
      - On the one hand, participants were reassured that the government was diligent, and glad to learn the information so they could discard or avoid purchasing the particular food item.
      - On the other hand, participants also admitted they wondered about the conditions which allowed an unsafe food item to enter the food supply chain, and became more anxious about the safety of the food supply in general.

### **3. KEY FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 PERCEIVED ROLE OF GOVERNMENT**

##### ***Standards and regulations***

- The general impression of Canadian standards and regulations was favourable.
- Interest in learning the legalities of standards and regulations was low.
- Consumers demonstrated a very low confidence in the enforcement of regulations, especially at the local level.
- The enforcement of standards and regulations occupied the lion's share of consumer questions, doubts and uncertainties.

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### ***Government responsibilities***

- Consumers were unclear about who does what.
- People had low awareness about what the government does and how well the job is being done—but they were hopeful.

### ***Government priorities***

- A perception gap could be seen to exist between food safety as a top ranking government priority and low awareness about what the government actually does.
- Consumers expected their government to focus on enforcement of standards and regulations, food labelling, and consumer education—all of which were seen to reflect the importance government gives to food safety.

### ***Crisis management—food recalls/alerts***

- Food recalls or alerts evoked conflicting feelings of anxiety and confidence.
- Consumers demonstrated a high awareness of past food recalls but had difficulty remembering any details of what happened and why—to them, food recalls seemed to be becoming too commonplace.
- People were very aware that bacterial contamination could affect meat and produce—so much so that E. coli and salmonella have now become familiar terms in the consumer vocabulary, although the two were often confused.
- Pet food recalls were considered a family affair.

### ***Government credibility***

- While consumers trusted what the government said when there was a food recall or alert, this should not be taken for granted. Trust in government is at risk each time there is a food recall.

### ***Made in Canada label***

- Learning about the standards of the *Made in Canada* label increased consumer anxiety.
- The *Made in Canada* label had low credibility and was questioned because it was thought to guarantee nothing and was worrisome to consumers.

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### ***Confidence in the food supply***

- The general impression of food safety in Canada was favourable but fragile. While the safety of the food supply was thought to fall within acceptable limits, people indicated that anxiety was just below the surface ready to quickly emerge.
- Reasons for being less confident today were said to have increased from a few years ago.
- The discussion about enforcement of standards and regulations directly impacted feelings of confidence, in a negative way.
- Consumers said they believed the food industry was not doing its share to ensure food was safe.

## **3.2 FOOD SAFETY CONCERNS**

### ***General food labelling***

- While people indicated that food label reading was on the rise, food labels were a confusing source of information for consumers. Often misunderstood, they created frustration and mistrust.
- Chemicals, additives and shelf-life extending agents (preservatives and packaging) were perceived as serious health threats.
- The truth of expiry dates was questioned.
- Issues discussed: Uneasiness about incomplete or misleading food labels with regard to chemicals, additives, preservatives, allergenic components, general nutritional truth, and expiry dates in all types of foods.

### ***Meat and poultry***

- Consumers believed meat and poultry contained harmful and highly hazardous substances added by the food industry.
- Consumers had conflicting feelings about eating the meat and poultry they bought at retail outlets and restaurants.
- The perceived health risks of meat and poultry were long term, unknown and scary, while short term risks were seen as acceptable, for now.
- Mad cow disease was still strongly imprinted on consumers' minds.



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- Issues discussed: Uncertainty about eating meat and poultry due to steroids, hormones, additives and antibiotic use, and what these animals were being fed, evidenced by mad cow disease.

### ***Organic food labelling***

- Organic food evoked favourable first impressions because they were not supposed to contain the hazardous substances that the food industry normally adds.
- Consumers were unclear about what the organic label really means because it is poorly regulated and potentially misleading.
- Issues discussed: Considerable confusion re organic vs. natural foods.

### ***Safety inspections***

- Food inspections directly impacted consumer confidence in food, mainly in a negative way.
- Doubts associated with the integrity of inspectors and the inspection system were higher for the food service sector, followed closely by the food industry as a whole.
- Pet food and toy recalls significantly increased consumer anxiety.
- Consumers had little awareness about who was responsible for food inspection and how it is done.
- Food inspection methods were one of the few areas of government administration that people expressed interested in learning about—mainly for reassurance.
- Issues discussed: Strong doubts emerged about the effectiveness and integrity of inspections in all areas—from the farm to processing plants, retail and restaurant levels—and at all levels—local, regional, national and international—the latter fuelled by recent toy and pet food recalls.

### ***Imported food***

- Overall, consumers had low confidence in imported food, which was viewed as a major threat to the safety of the food supply.
- People saw globalization as a cause of decreasing food quality.
- Imported food was often synonymous with food from third-world countries.
- Canada looked good when compared with standards from other countries.

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- Imports from the United States, Europe, Russia and Commonwealth countries were barely mentioned.
  - Issues discussed: Imported food carried a much higher perceived risk compared to domestic food because most other countries were thought to be less regulated than Canada.

### ***Food industry and food service sector practices***

- Consumers realized that food contamination could occur at every link in the food supply chain, but were not alarmed by that.
- Food contamination was closely associated with hygiene practices.
- People appeared to have an increasing mistrust of large corporations.
- Issues discussed: Scepticism and mistrust about the processing and unhygienic handling practices at plants, restaurants, fast food and retail outlets.

### ***Mercury in fish and seafood***

- Worries about mercury levels, mainly in salmon and tuna, were based on fuzzy information, including the farmed vs. wild debate.
- Consumers shared few spontaneous concerns related to the safety of fish.
- Issues discussed: Fish could have detrimental health effects.

### ***Genetically modified food***

- There was unanimous concern about and negative impressions of biotechnology products.
- Consumers included GMO as part of food safety because of its unknown cumulative impact.
- Issues discussed: There was uncertainty due to the unknown cumulative effects on health and ultimately on the food supply.

### ***Plastics and packaging***

- A high level of anxiety emerged about plastics and food containers—people were puzzled and uncertain about what to do.
- Packaging standards and regulations were seen to have not kept pace with the times.

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- Issues discussed: There was increasing cancer-related worry about the leaching of harmful chemicals into water, using plastics in microwave ovens, or the impact on foods in plastic containers.

### ***Water contamination***

- The Walkerton incident left a legacy of worry about water consumption, as did produce recalls due to flawed irrigation methods.
- Water and beverages were very much a part of food safety in the minds of consumers.
- Issues discussed: The safety of the water supply was a concern in terms of drinking, food preparation and irrigation.

### ***Sugar substitutes***

- Disease-causing substitutes were a growing issue due to the current public health focus on weight and obesity.
- Issues discussed: Aspartame was seen to be a carcinogen.

## **3.3 FOOD HANDLING AT HOME**

- Low level risks were generally associated with foodborne illness.
- Food poisoning was seen to have mainly short-term effects, compared with the cumulative damages from chemicals, pesticides, etc.
- Consumers seemed to have a good understanding of causes and symptoms of foodborne illness, and a good working knowledge of food-handling practices at home.
- Self-protection efforts fell into five main categories: (1) washing hands and food, (2) cleaning utensils and surfaces, (3) cooking and safe storage, (4) respect for expiry dates, and (5) selective shopping.
- People still wanted more information and reassurance that they are on the right track.

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### 3.4 COMMUNICATION ISSUES

- People relied heavily on the mass media for information, and used the Internet as a supplement.
- Consumers had very low awareness or recall of specific Website resources on food safety, or any printed materials.
- People increasingly tended to read labels, but did not find much satisfactory or understandable information they could use.
- People were willing to register for automatic email notification of alerts and/or recalls, but no one was receptive to automated phone messages. Note that participants were not made aware that such phone messages were aimed mainly at people who suffered with allergies.

## 4. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

### *General*

- Food safety was seen as a highly relevant and important personal issue for Canadian consumers, dominated by questions, doubts, uncertainties and sometimes fears.
- It is clear that any communication or action from the government in this area would get keen attention from the public. However, because confidence is precarious, feelings of safety can rapidly shift into a credibility crisis. Consequently, a continuous flow of communication is required to maintain trust in government.
- How people view government action on regulations enforcement, integrity of inspectors, food labels, packaging standards, chemicals and GMOs has a direct correlation with their level of confidence, even more than its action to prevent bacterial contamination.
- Apart from recalls or alerts, people do not actively look for information mainly because:
  - They assume food in Canada is safe enough or risks fall within acceptable limits (unless otherwise advised by media).
  - Their concerns about long-term cumulative effects are dormant and not top-of-mind.
  - They do not know where accurate, trustworthy and relevant information is available, who provides it and how to gain access.

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### ***Proactive Information***

- If there is one overriding message for communications coming out of this study, it is that consumers are receptive to food safety information that is pushed proactively, and that information should be pushed if the government wants to maintain a continuous flow of communication.
- Not doing this and only communicating when there is a problem (i.e., a food alert or recall) gives the impression that the government is reacting and therefore consumer confidence is more at risk.
- The tone of information and content might benefit from taking into account how consumers currently connect with food safety.

### ***Consumer State of Mind***

- Consumer orientations to food safety seem to fall along a continuum, whose polar opposites range between avoidance of disease on the one end to achieving and maintaining optimum health on the other.
  - At the avoidance of disease end, people's mindset focuses first on chemicals introduced by the food and farming industries, including mad cow, GMOs, fertilizers, pesticides, additives, antibiotics, preservatives, substitutes, plastics and packaging, etc., and then on bacterial contamination.
  - At the achieving and maintaining optimum health end, people's mindset focuses on organic, locally-produced and non-imported foods, whose labels indicate they are free from various substances.
- If we can imagine the continuum as a teeter-totter, right now people are more or less lumped at the avoidance end, mainly due to their concerns with chemicals.
  - Therefore messaging, whenever possible, should include considerations related to chemicals, not only bacteria. Food safety in Canada today mainly means free from chemicals.

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