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Agence canadienne  
d'inspection des aliments

# Public Opinion Research with Food Businesses to Support Compliance with Food Safety Regulations: 2021-2022

## Executive Summary

Prepared for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency

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For more information on this summary, please contact [information@inspection.gc.ca](mailto:information@inspection.gc.ca)

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Canada 

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a telephone survey and focus groups conducted by Earnscliffe Strategy Group on behalf of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. The research was conducted from January to March 2022.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Recherche sur l'opinion publique auprès des entreprises alimentaires à l'appui de la conformité à la réglementation sur la salubrité des aliments : 2021-2022

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## Executive Summary

Earnscliffe Strategy Group (Earnscliffe) is pleased to present this report to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) regarding qualitative and quantitative research undertaken to support food businesses' compliance with food safety regulations.

The Safe Food for Canadians Regulations (SFCR) were published in Canada Gazette II in June 2018. The SFCR generally apply to food for human consumption (including ingredients) that is imported, exported, or inter-provincially traded for commercial purposes. It also applies to the slaughter of food animals from which meat products to be exported or inter-provincially traded may be derived.

The main objective of this research project was to gain insights into the views of Canadian food businesses on food safety and food safety regulations, with a focus on small food businesses, food importers and exporters, and the manufactured food sector. This study also sought to help the CFIA better understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food industry, including the growth of e-commerce. The research will inform effective implementation of, communications about, and compliance with the SFCR.

This research was required in order for the CFIA to track key indicators on awareness and confidence, as well as barriers to compliance and factors that would increase the likelihood of compliance. Feedback collected during the research will also support refinement of current products and services as well as the development and promotion of new communications products, services, guidance and tools for regulated parties to help them overcome barriers to compliance.

To meet the research objectives, Earnscliffe conducted a telephone survey of 450 Canadians who own or hold a managerial role at a business in the food sector and are responsible for regulatory compliance. Surveys were conducted between January 13-February 10, 2022 in English and French. The survey took an average of 20 minutes to complete.

Our fieldwork subcontractor for the quantitative portion was Leger. The survey was conducted via telephone from Leger's centralized call-centre using their state-of-the-art Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system.

The wave of qualitative research that followed the quantitative portion consisted of a series of 4 online focus groups with food business owners or employees in the food sector responsible for regulatory compliance. For each group, 6 individuals were recruited as participants. In total, 22 people participated in the focus group discussions. The 4 online focus groups were conducted with participants from across Canada. The group with participants from Quebec was conducted in French. Participants were asked for written consent for all sessions to be video recorded and

audio recorded. Participants were provided with an incentive of \$350. Appendix B provides greater detail on how the groups were recruited, while Appendix E provides the discussion guide used for the focus groups and Appendix D provides the screener used for recruiting the focus groups.

It is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy and public opinion research. Focus group research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

The key findings of this research are presented below.

- Awareness of the Safe Food for Canadians Regulations (SFCR) has remained stable among CFIA's traditionally regulated parties which are the non-retail-only businesses (74% in 2022 vs 75% in 2021). With retail only businesses awareness is lower than the previous wave (48% this wave vs 60% in 2021). A few in each focus group were aware of the SFCR, but others had not heard of the regulations or at least not by that name.
- Three-quarters (77%) of survey respondents believe the SFCR apply to their business. Among those actually aware of the SFCR, 90% agree they apply.
  - Similarly, focus group participants who were aware of the SFCR believed they apply to their business, but those unaware of the regulations were unsure. Once told about the SFCR, participants agreed that they seem important. They believed that the SFCR set standards for the industry and create an even playing field for businesses. Participants also agreed these kinds of standards are important to ensuring consumers are protected.
- As noted in previous surveys, most feel they very or somewhat clearly understand the food safety regulations that apply to their business and are very confident that their business meets food safety requirements.
  - The focus groups uncovered a gap in understanding of regulations, primarily among new, small businesses. While more established businesses seemed to have a decent grasp of regulations, newer businesses said that figuring out how to be compliant was confusing or intimidating but did not wholly blame the CFIA for this. They sensed that some of their difficulty was their own ignorance, but that the CFIA could do more to explain the process in simpler terms.

- Participants with new, smaller businesses wished that the CFIA’s website provided a more organized, comprehensive overview of the specific activities they need to do to become SFCR compliant. Specifically, a how-to guide or workbook, as well as templates for procedures they will need to establish, would be helpful.
- The vast majority (79%) have written operating procedures on food safety, while two-thirds (64%) have a traceability program and about half have a Safe Food for Canadians licence (54%) and have written preventive controls in place (51%).
- Businesses are slightly divided over the greatest challenge posed by the SFCR. About a quarter (26%) say written preventive controls, 20% say traceability and 19% say licensing, while 35% don’t feel any of these are a great challenge.
  - In the qualitative research, while some did not feel any of the SFCR elements were challenging, others, particularly newer businesses, found the process around traceability was time consuming.
- COVID-19 has had an impact on most businesses, but three-quarters agree that the CFIA has been flexible in enforcing food safety regulations to allow them to adapt to pandemic conditions (75%) and that the CFIA has provided clear guidance on how it is approaching compliance during the pandemic (73%).
- Overall, large majorities agree that the CFIA has been transparent in addressing non-compliance and reporting and publishing such instances. Slightly more feel the CFIA should not publish the names of companies that receive AMPS (44%) than feel it should (38%).
  - Focus groups participants felt it appropriate that there would be consequences for businesses not following CFIA rules and regulations, but participants hoped and/or assumed that consequences would vary in severity based on the infraction. They hoped that the CFIA would give businesses a chance to correct their errors but agreed that if a business ignored warnings or posed a significant threat to public health, that business should be named publicly.
  - If they became aware that a business in their supply chain was conducting unsafe or fraudulent activities related to food safety, virtually all agreed that they would likely sever ties with that company to protect their own reputation, as well as their consumers. Most would also consider reporting this behaviour to the CFIA.
- Usage of My CFIA remains similar to last year’s survey – about a quarter (28%) have used it and the vast majority who have are satisfied with their experience.

- In the focus groups, participants unaware of My CFIA indicated they would be interested in using such a service.
- Few use the CFIA virtual assistant / chatbot (just 14% of those who have searched for information on the CFIA website, or about 4% of the sample overall) and Ask CFIA (7% overall).
  - Participants in the focus groups were skeptical of the virtual assistant / chatbot. Most had used another virtual chatbot before and found the experience frustrating because it did not provide helpful answers to their questions.
- Very few businesses follow the CFIA on social media, but among those open to receiving information this way, the topic they would be most interested in is anything to do with new regulations or updates.

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I hereby certify as a representative of Earnscliffe Strategy Group that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:

Date: March 11, 2022



Doug Anderson  
Principal, Earnscliffe