



News Release

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Few Risks in Ontario Food Supply But Some Improvements Needed: Auditor General

(TORONTO) Ontario's food supply is generally safe, but some risks to the food supply could be further reduced, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk says in her *2019 Annual Report*, tabled in the Legislative Assembly today.

"We found overall that the Ontario food supply was safe but that more could be done to improve the systems and procedures used by the Ministry of Agriculture and the province's Public Health Units for licensing, inspection and food-sampling programs," Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk says in the Report.

"We noted, for example, a need for better ways to deal with pesticide residues in produce, accuracy of food-labelling in provincial food-processing plants, the licensing of fish processors and inconsistencies in public disclosure of food premises inspection results."

Foodborne illnesses account for 41,000 visits to hospital emergency rooms and 137,000 more to physicians' offices each year. Contaminated food kills about 70 people in Ontario annually and sends another 6,600 to hospital. Contamination of food can happen at any point in the food-supply chain, from the farm to transport to preparation and packaging.

In Ontario, prevention of foodborne illness is the responsibility of all three levels of government; Ontario is generally responsible for meat, produce, fish and dairy produced, processed and consumed only in this province, while the federal government is responsible for food imported from, or produced for export to other provinces and countries. Food premises are inspected by Public Health Units, funded by the province and the municipalities.

Among findings of the audit:

- Public Health Units are responsible to investigate complaints of foodborne illnesses at food premises on a timely basis; inspections within two days of receiving a complaint are considered a best practice. However, the audit reviewed inspection reports from five Units between 2016 and 2018, and found that all five did not meet the two-day window for inspections in 20% of cases that required inspections.
- The *Cosmetic Pesticides Ban Act* lists 131 pesticides that cannot be used for groundskeeping purposes on lawns or at parks, for example, due to potential health and environmental concerns. However, these substances are allowed in agricultural farming for operational and economic reasons. Between 2014 and 2018, the Ministry of Agriculture tested about 1,200 samples of Ontario-grown produce and found residues of 14 banned pesticides that exceeded Health Canada limits a total of 76 times.
- The federal government requires certification for products labelled as organic when they are sold across provincial or international borders—but Ontario allows the sale of non-certified products labelled as organic within the province. The audit also noted that routine sample testing of produce for pesticides residue is not required for the organic certification process.

- Fish processors who only sell in Ontario do not require a licence to operate, so the Ministry of Agriculture may not be able to close them down for serious food-safety deficiencies because there is no licence to revoke.
- The audit found that there are currently no minimum provincial requirements for the frequency of inspections of special events, such as summer fairs and festivals. While not all special events require inspections, we also found that only about 12% of all special events in 2018 within the jurisdictions of the five Public Health Units we visited were inspected, and only about 15% were inspected in 2017.
- The audit found that there was no federal or provincial government certification or specific requirements in place for some of the more common methods of production claims, such as “free run” and “free range.”

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Read the report at www.auditor.on.ca

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