



Volume 1, Chapter 3.06—Food Safety Inspection Programs 2019 Value-for-Money Audit

Why We Did This Audit

- A 2017 survey found that 54% of Canadians had concerns about food safety.
- Over the last decade, there have been a number of food recalls in Ontario.
- Significant regulatory changes have occurred since our last audit of the Ministry of Agriculture in 2008. Our Office has never audited the delivery of food safety programs by Public Health Units.

Why It Matters

- Food safety affects all Ontarians. Foodborne illness accounts for 41,000 visits to hospital emergency rooms and 137,000 more to physicians' offices each year.
- Contamination of food can happen at any point in the food-supply chain, from the farm to transport to preparation and packaging.

What We Found

- Since April 2015, 98% of meat tested negative for harmful drug residue. In the 2% of cases of positive drug-residue test results, there was no follow-up with the farmers who raised the animals to prevent repeat occurrences.
- Some pesticides banned for use in groundskeeping due to potential health and environmental reasons are found in Ontario-grown produce in residue levels exceeding Health Canada's allowable limits.
- Fish processors who sell only in Ontario do not require a licence to operate. The Ministry of Agriculture, therefore, may not be able to close them because there is no licence to revoke if inspectors identify serious food-safety deficiencies. Our sample review of 182 inspection reports on fish-processing plants found that two-thirds of the infractions noted in 2018/19 were repeat offences.
- Businesses operating solely within Ontario can market their products as "organic" even if they are not certified to the Canadian Organic Standards. In comparison, Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia all have laws requiring that organic food be certified to the Canadian Organic Standards, even when it is sold only within their borders.
- The Public Health Units do not have an up-to-date listing of food premises subject to inspection. This is made more difficult by the recent growth of online and home-based food businesses. At the five Public Health Units we visited, we found 253 complaints relating to food premises whose existence the units were unaware of because they were not on their lists.
- The degree of public disclosure of inspection results for food premises, along with the inspection grading systems used by the 35 Public Health Units, varied across the province and led to inconsistent information provided to the public across Ontario.
- While not all special events require inspections, we found that only about 12% of all special events in 2018 within the jurisdictions of the five Public Health Units we visited were inspected. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, special events can be high risk because the usual safety features of a kitchen may not be available at outdoor events.
- Based on our review of inspection reports from 2016 to 2018 at five Health Units, we found that for those foodborne-illness complaints that required food premises inspections, Public Health Units did not inspect 20% of food premises within the best practice of two days after receiving the complaint.

Conclusions

- Overall, there are efficient systems and procedures in place to keep the Ontario food supply safe, but more can be done to improve the Ministry of Agriculture's licensing and inspection programs.
- The five Public Health Units we visited had effective systems and procedures in place to inspect food premises and conduct foodborne-illness surveillance and outbreak management in accordance with applicable legislation and regulations. However, we noted several areas where improvements could be made, including inspection of online and home-based food businesses and special events. We also found inconsistencies between Public Health Units with respect to public disclosure of inspection results both online and on-site at the food premises.