

Group Defends Handling of Tainted-Beef Scare as Recalls Increase

TERRY PEDWELL, The Canadian Press

OTTAWA -- More beef was ordered off Canadian store shelves amid a promise of more recalls to come Friday as food-safety officials sought to explain why it took three weeks to shut down the Alberta meat-packing plant at the center of Canada's latest E. coli scare.

When routine testing first detected a problem on Sept. 4, there was no compelling reason for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to order a recall or shut down the XL Foods plant in Brooks, Alta., CFIA officials said.

Since then, however, the plant southeast of Calgary has had its operating license temporarily suspended and products have been recalled for fear of E. coli contamination.

Late Friday, the agency issued yet another recall, this time for "whole muscle cuts" of beef from XL Foods, including steaks and roasts, on top of the list of previously recalled ground beef products.

The stores named in the latest release include Wal-Mart, Food Basics, Metro, Co-op stores and Steakhouse Angus Select.

In Quebec, Marche Richelieu, Marches A-M-I, Metro, Metro F, Metro Plus, Metro Plus F and Super C were added to the list.

And the CFIA says further recalls are likely in the days ahead.

When testing in the U.S. and Canada first detected a possible E. coli issue in the plant, there was nothing to indicate that any tainted meat had reached consumers, said Brian Evans, a special adviser to the agency.

"The primary issue at that time was to identify if, in fact, there was any product in the marketplace that needed to be recalled," Evans told a news conference in Ottawa.

"We did confirm that neither the product that we had found through our testing program nor the product that the U.S. had identified ... had gone into the marketplace. Issuing a recall for a product that isn't in the public domain isn't something that we're able to do."

Evans said further information on Sept. 10 triggered an "intensive, in-depth review" that included sending a team of specialists into the plant to search for a possible problem.

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Continuing daily testing during that period did not reveal anything "to suggest that the product was of a significant concern," Evans said.

"We were 24 hours, pedal-to-the-metal, in the plant through the (Sept. 15-16) weekend trying to satisfy ourselves that consumers were not being put at risk."

It wasn't until Thursday, however, that the plant's operating license was suspended. XL Foods has not yet taken the steps necessary to allow the plant to resume operations, and won't be allowed to do so until it does, Evans said.

The problem, he added, appears to be the result of different factors — none of which would by themselves normally pose a problem — combining to create a heightened risk.

Evans says all products currently at the plant are "under CFIA detention and control," and will be released only after being tested for E. coli. Any products found to be contaminated would be sent to a landfill, he said.

On Friday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture again extended its public health alert about the company's products sold at stores in 30 states, including those of retail giant Walmart.

The department's food safety and inspection service said XL Foods Inc. was voluntarily recalling all beef products from these stores — not just ground beef — over concerns about possible E. coli contamination.

"The agency is using this public health alert to make the public aware that these products are considered adulterated and should be returned to the place of purchase or destroyed," the department said Friday in a release out of Washington, D.C.

Canada revoked the plant's permit to export beef to the U.S. on Sept. 13 at the request of the USDA. Since Sept. 16, the CFIA has issued at least eight recall alerts for XL Foods ground beef products over E. coli concerns.

Evans said more recall notices will likely be issued in the coming days as testing continues.

Opposition critics in Ottawa are demanding to know why it took so long.

Liberal MP Ralph Goodale blamed the E. coli scare on changes to the meat inspection system introduced by the Harper Conservatives.

"The company fell short of proper standards way back in August, and this government's inspection system failed to be on top of it then," Goodale told the House of Commons.

"Partly, that's because government inspectors don't actually inspect much anymore."

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They just monitor company inspections."

Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz insisted that food safety has not been compromised and the government actually has more inspectors on the job than in previous years.

The CFIA has 40 inspectors and six veterinarians working full-time at the Brooks XL Foods plant. Evans said staffing at the plant increased by roughly six employees over the last three years. Another team of eight CFIA employees was brought into the plant shortly after the E. coli problem was discovered, he said.

Alberta Health Minister Fred Horne, attending a meeting of his federal and provincial colleagues in Halifax, praised officials for their work in dealing with the scare.

"I think our public-health officials have done a very good job over the last few days of updating Albertans," Horne said.

"Do I have any concerns as the minister of health that we're not on top of this? Absolutely not."

The Canadian Cattlemen's Association, meanwhile, was trying to reassure its 83,000 member producers about the closure of the XL Foods plant.

The closure will reduce the ability of the industry to slaughter and process live cattle, but it shouldn't have a significant effect on Canada's beef industry, beyond a brief, minor increase in price, the association said.

Locally, however, the impact could be significant, said Brooks Mayor Martin Shields, noting the plant is one of the area's largest employers.

"There are about 2,200 people who are gainfully employed with that company and a lot of them live within our community," Shields said. "That is a very large concern. That payroll is significant."

The union representing workers at the plant said it expected employees to continue receiving paychecks from the company while it is shut down.

But Tom Hesse of the United Food and Commercial Workers union said XL Foods has been slow to give its employees information about the closure.

"They are laid off either in the long or the short term, that's the bottom line," Hesse said. If they don't get paid, many will have to leave the area to find new jobs, he added.

"Sitting around in Brooks without any work," he said. "Why would they stay?"

The Canadian-owned XL Foods plant has a slaughter capacity of about 5,000 cattle a day.

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Last year, an estimated 2.9 million cattle were slaughtered in federally inspected meat plants in Canada. Most of these cattle were processed in Alberta by the XL Foods plant in Brooks and by a Cargill-owned plant near High River.

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