



A Decade of the CFIA

After 10 years, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is still a work in progress

The mantra of procrastinators, “Rome was not built in a day,” is also a bit of a tease in that it’s based on the premise that time will somehow nurture something special. Well the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) was not built in a day either. In fact it has been a decade of work in progress, with that elusive “something special” still to be tamed.

The creation of the CFIA has been the most significant development in the Canadian food industry over the past decade in dramatically transforming the way foods are governed. Some may argue that the Internet and HACCP are also contenders, but it is the CFIA that really stands out.

Establishing the CFIA required an Act of parliament. During the period of late 1996 and early 1997 parliamentarians recognized that a significant change in the federal structure of how foods were regulated “from gate to plate” would be necessary to address the growing pressures on government resources to manage food safety and compliance. However, federal members of parliament were not so enthusiastic about carving out a “food agency” from within the existing federal bureaucracy. Finally, in March 1997, Bill C-60 prevailed and the CFIA was established, officially opening its doors for business on April 1, 1997.

The primary focus of the CFIA was to enhance Canadian food safety. It would do so by consolidating the inspection activities of numerous services previously administered by Health Canada, Industry Canada, Agriculture Canada and Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Who would have dreamt then that a uniform and consistent approach based on risk-based inspection was the way to go? It’s obvious now. Under the previous governmental structure there was often an overlap of services, making for inefficient communication and direction among the various federal government departments. At the time the idea of consolidating inspection activities was fairly novel. Today, other jurisdictions around the world have embraced this or are in the midst of doing this, proving that the vision that brought the CFIA together was right. With today’s problems of too few resources, too little time, and much too complex issues, the

old structure would have ground to a halt by now. It’s hard enough for the CFIA as it is.

Underpinning the agency is the Canadian Food Inspection Agency Act. Along with the consolidation of the various federal government departments came the various statutes and regulations they administered. Another objective of the CFIA was to further consolidate the many laws governing foods in Canada. This however is that “something special” we are still longing for. There have been attempts in the past, such as Bill C-27, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency Enforcement Act in 2004, which got as far as first reading in the house before it became a victim of an election. Apparently creating an agency is easier than consolidating the many laws under the former fragmented government bureaucracy that had

been orphaned and then adopted by the CFIA.

Although we would likely have more reasons to complain under the old regime, the CFIA has still not jelled into that streamlined and consistent organization that it could be. The matter is compounded by a failure in the past decade to bring about true and substantial reform and consolidation of federal legislation governing food. As a result old partitions and bureaucratic remnants still linger within the CFIA. That’s not due to a lack of effort as attempts, as noted before, have been made to consolidate a single food Act. This, however, requires the attention and vision of parliamentarians to complete the CFIA process. A single consolidated, up-to-date food Act is the next big step that needs to be taken to further advance the CFIA.

The future of a consolidated and more efficient, effective Canadian food inspection system will also need provincial and territorial co-operation. This won’t be easy, but if politicians are serious about enhancing food safety in Canada, a greater culture of co-operation and action is needed. It is happening, it’s just a question of how long and how painful it will become before that “something special” is realized.

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