



HIGHWAY STARS

Transportation, and especially the trucking industry, plays a vital role in keeping Canada's food supply safe

By Mark Cardwell

Ron Lennox bristles at a suggestion that transportation is the weak link in Canada's food safety chain. "Transportation is not a significant source of food-borne illness or contamination in this country," growls the vice-president of Trade and Security of the Canadian Trucking Alliance (CTA), a lobby group that represents some 4,500 national carriers. "In fact, I can't recall a single situation where a Canadian trucking company — or any other transportation company for that matter — has been called on the carpet over an outbreak."

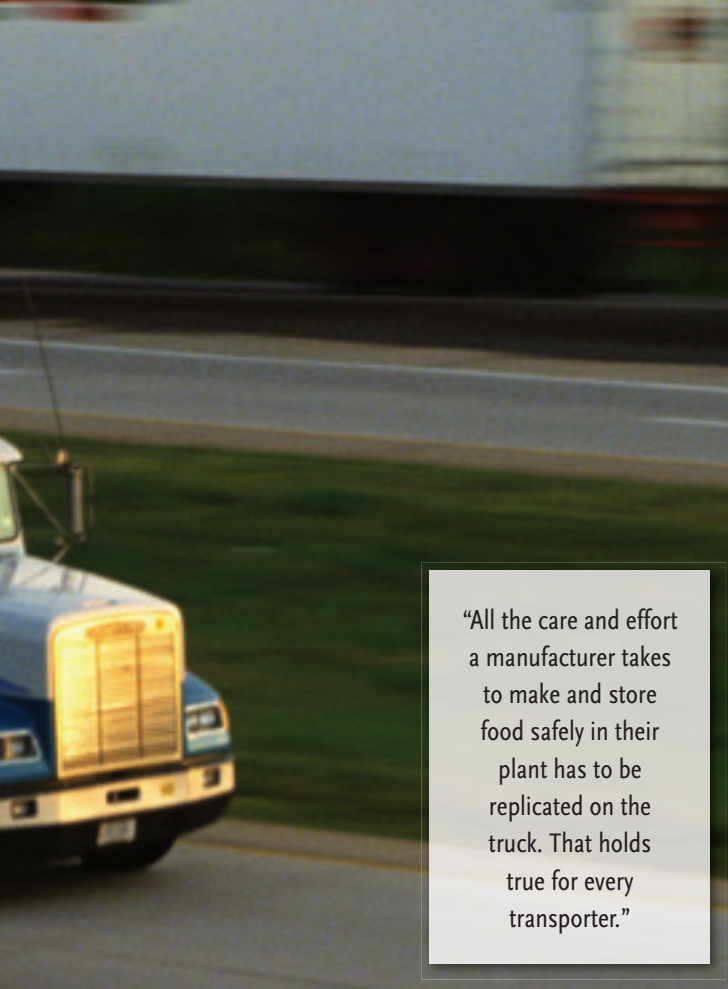
When it comes to ensuring the safety of food *en route* to market, Canadian transporters do have a seemingly unblemished record. And the reason, food-safety experts say, is that shipping associations and transportation companies of all stripes and in every realm — road, rail, air and sea — are following the timeworn wisdom that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

"The industry has done a truly remarkable job in meeting the many challenges that are involved with transporting food," says Frank Massong, a senior manager and a food safety expert with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). "They have shown a keen interest in the issue of food safety and have taken steps to acquire the tools they need to counter threats and to communicate between themselves and the food industry."

According to Massong, the biggest step has been the transportation industry's recognition of — and, increasingly, adherence to — international standards for the evaluation and control of food safety concerns from farm to fork. Provincial and federal regulations and guidelines now touch on everything from the appropriate temperature of products being moved to the types of chemicals used to clean trucks.

And, says Massong, systematic preventative approach models like HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) that help identify potential food-safety hazards and to take corrective action at CCPs (Critical Control Points) at all stages of the food production and preparation process, are now being widely used across the transportation industry. At the same time, an ever-growing number of Canadian transportation companies are adopting management systems like ISO 22000, the first international standard that takes a holistic approach to food safety by forcing companies to consider and evaluate concerns beyond their operations and throughout the entire food chain.

"I like to tell people that a closed truck or container is like storage on wheels," says Massong, noting that the CFIA has provided food safety know-how and funding to help some 40 national associations with members involved at various levels in the transportation of food to acquire tools like HACCP. As a result, HACCP is now the industry's common denominator. "All the care and effort a manufacturer takes to make and store food safely in their plant has to be replicated on the truck," he says. "That holds true for every transporter."



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The same can also be said about the care and vigilance that is needed to safeguard every one of the thousands of food products that are shipped in, out and across Canada every day of the year. While ready-to-eat products and fresh produce are considered the trickiest to transport because they are the most vulnerable to contamination, Massong says even seemingly safe products like vacuum-sealed cans carry transportation risks. “If a can is inadvertently frozen because it was too close to a truck’s wall on a really cold day, it could expand the can, unravel the seal and let air inside, which could create a risk of botulism,” he says. “So whether it’s keeping things frozen, keeping them from freezing or protecting things that are susceptible to changes in temperature or humidity, like bulk flour, which can’t get wet, it all comes down to manipulating environmental factors to the best possible advantage.”

The food industry, too, has helped and encouraged its transportation partners to develop food safety programs and tools that identify and address specific hazards linked to shipping and storage. One of the best examples is the CTA’s Trucking Food Safety Program, which uses HACCP principles to develop commodity-specific food safety modules that are applicable to all trucking operations. Among other things, the program consists of standard operating procedures for the transportation of everything from frozen and refrigerated products to fresh produce and live animals.

“Food safety is an issue we are dead serious about,” says

Lennox, who estimates that trucks haul “over 90 per cent” of all the food produced in (or imported into) Canada, and “almost all” of the country’s fresh produce and refrigerated foods. According to figures from Statistics Canada, there were 2.1 million food shipments by truck across the country in 2003, generating \$850 million in revenues for the trucking industry. To protect that market, Lennox says the CTA is both helping and encouraging its members to become HACCP certified, “to try to eliminate hazards before they become a problem. And I think we’ve been very successful.”

John Gyorky agrees. As corporate dock manager of the New Hamburg, Ont.-based Erb Transport group, Canada’s largest family owned refrigerated transportation specialist and one of only six national carriers that are HACCP certified, Gyorky oversees the food safety processes and standards that were put in place two years ago for the company’s 10 terminals, 1,000 refrigerated trailers and 1,200 employees nationwide. Among other things, those processes involve sanitizing in dock areas, temperature monitoring in the company’s fleet of reefers, regular yard checks, the creation of HACCP committees at each terminal, and semi-annual internal HACCP audits. This is in addition to an annual audit by third-party regulators, which Erb passed in June with a perfect score. “We had a good foundation to begin with and a lot of the processes we had in place have just been officially recognized,” says Gyorky. “But what HACCP has done is to help us identify things that we might have taken for granted before. And the checks and balances we now have in place work very well.”

According to John Kukoly, manager of Food Safety and Organic Certification with QMI, North America’s leading management systems registrar, the ease with which many major Canadian transportation companies have both adapted and adhered to the HACCP model and management systems like ISO 22000 demonstrate the strength – and not weakness – of transportation in the food-safety chain. “Transportation had the potential to be the weak link because it was one of the last ones in the food chain that people looked at in the early 1990s,” says Kukoly, adding that several *E. coli* outbreaks in the U.S. at that time raised public concerns over food safety.

But, he adds, the transportation industry has done “a tremendous job” catching up in recent years, to the point where it is now as solid a link as any other in the food safety chain. “Canada is blessed with some fabulous transporters that have well-trained people working in management systems that ensure the consistent application of preventative food-safety measures,” says Kukoly. “Transportation has the potential to be the weak link for the simple fact that every food item passes through it. But the fact, I think, that there have been no nightmare scenarios in which an outbreak has been linked to the transportation of food speaks well of the industry.” FC