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**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

2019 Annual Report,
Auditor General:

Ministry of Agriculture,
Food and Rural Affairs

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Wednesday 4 March 2020

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de l'Alimentation
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DES
COMPTES PUBLICS**

Wednesday 4 March 2020

Mercredi 4 mars 2020

The committee met at 1233 in room 151, following a closed session.

2019 ANNUAL REPORT,
AUDITOR GENERAL
MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE,
FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Consideration of section 3.06, Food Safety Inspection Program.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): I'd like to call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order. We are here to begin consideration of the Food Safety Inspection Program, section 3.06 from the 2019 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario.

Joining us today are officials from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Thank you for being here today to answer the committee's questions. You'll have 20 minutes, collectively, for an opening presentation to the committee. We will then move into the question-and-answer portion of the meeting, where we will rotate back and forth between the government and official opposition caucuses in 20-minute intervals.

I invite you each to introduce yourselves for Hansard before you begin speaking. You may begin when ready.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My name is Greg Meredith. I'm Deputy Minister of OMAFRA. Did you want to do introductions all at once?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Whichever you like.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Kelly McAslan. I'm assistant deputy minister of the food safety and environment division at OMAFRA.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Hi, I'm Melanie Fraser. I'm the associate deputy minister. I'm here for Helen Angus, who had an unforeseen personal matter. I'm here to represent the Ministry of Health, along with my colleague.

Dr. David Williams: Yes, I'm Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health, province of Ontario.

Mr. Greg Meredith: If you agree, Mr. Chair, I'll start off.

As mentioned, Kelly McAslan, assistant deputy minister of the food safety and environment division, is here. We also have a number of experts who will add depth and

precision to some of the answers and who can address many of the questions that might be of a more technical nature. So if you agree, we'll be bringing them up as required.

Before I make my formal remarks, which I will keep short, I did want to acknowledge the Auditor General and the very high calibre of engagement with us on behalf of her team. It was a very thorough, very diligent and in-depth audit, which we very much appreciate.

I did want to say, Ms. Lysyk, that your personal engagement in the audit, in the file and in engaging me directly was very much appreciated.

I would say that, in general, our philosophy in the ministry is very much that a value-for-money audit and the kinds of analyses and observations that we can gain from the auditor's team are very valuable in every case. In the case of food safety, it's particularly important that we listen carefully, look for gaps, and understand others' perspectives. We're in a process of continuous improvement, but any value-added that we can gain, we very much appreciate. So we saw this as a partnership, and we're very happy to go forward with the recommendations that the auditor's team has made.

We were very much appreciative of the effort, and very appreciative about the observations from the auditor's team that we have a fairly robust and strong food safety system. That's incredibly important to the ministry, to the minister, of course, and to the government. We have a very strong set of procedures and processes and protocols in place to prosecute that food safety agenda on behalf of Ontarians. It's incredibly important that we understand and have the rigour to improve the system.

It's a complex system in a couple of ways—partly represented here by our colleagues from the health ministry and public health. There are a lot of partners who play into the food safety system at the provincial level, but we have a very significant engagement at the federal level. The federal government has several bodies that play one role or another in the food safety space. We have Health Canada setting food policy and food safety standards and nutritional standards. We have the CFIA, which does inspection sampling for those processing firms that export outside of the province, either to other provinces or internationally. We have the Public Health Agency of Canada, which does disease surveillance, including food-borne illness surveillance. We've got the Pest Management Regulatory Agency, which tests, analyzes, registers and

approves all pesticides in Canada. We work very closely with all of those partners in trying to carrying out a fairly rigorous food system.

I wanted to take you briefly through the role that we play, and the breadth of it, in particular. We have about 150 staff inspectors across the province who look at over 4,000 meat, dairy and fruit and vegetable operations across the province. We have partners who engage on our behalf to inspect fish facilities. We work with the Dairy Farmers of Ontario very closely to inspect 3,400 dairy farms across the province. We carry out about 24,000 inspections a year. As part of that inspection process, we take about 68,000 product and environmental samples for testing in our labs. The results, I think, are very strong across all of those tests. We have an about 96% pass, so a 96% positive, outcome.

In terms of context, the importance of the industry can't be overestimated. It's worth about \$6 billion annually to the province in terms of GDP, so it's very economically important as well as important for health and food safety.

The challenge that we have, of course, with that complex a system is making sure that there are no gaps, making sure that the players are all playing to their highest possible impact, and making sure that lines of communication remain open. This is one of the areas where the auditor's team was very helpful in identifying areas where we could improve, and you'll see in the auditor's report and in our update report that we're taking those gaps very seriously, however small they may be.

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Again, I wanted to thank the Auditor General. I want to thank the committee for taking an interest in this. I think you have our summary report, which is a fairly comprehensive status report on what we've already done and our plan going forward against each one of the recommendations by the auditor.

One of the areas where we are particularly happy and pleased with our progress is in the fish processing business, where the recommendation was to license and to ensure that we have powers to revoke licences. So we've done that: As of January, we've got a regulation under our Food Safety and Quality Act that enables us to require licences, enables us to detain food, and enables a progressive compliance regime up to and including revocation of licences, so good progress on that.

Again, thank you for your interest, and I'll turn over the floor.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Thank you. Again, it's Melanie Fraser, associate deputy minister of Health.

I'd also like to acknowledge that we have some other colleagues joining us today from Toronto Public Health and Peel Public Health, so if there are any questions that require specific responses, again, we can invite them to the table. They both participated in the value-for-money audit.

I would reiterate Deputy Meredith's sentiments that we enjoy a very great working relationship with the Auditor General and, again, express our appreciation for both that relationship as well as this work. We welcome each and every one of these recommendations in this report. It's

important that we continue to work together to strengthen the food safety system.

I'll build off of Deputy Meredith's remarks and just talk a little bit about the role of the Ministry of Health in food safety, as well as Ontario's public health model, which is unique in Canada. In terms of the Ministry of Health, we do work in partnership with ministries, sectors and stakeholders to support food safety.

As it relates to food safety, we work under the oversight of the Health Protection and Promotion Act and related food premises regulations. The delivery of food safety programs happens through the 34 local boards of health.

As I said, we work very closely with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs in shared areas of responsibility, coordination and strategic priorities, and I think that's done both through our relationship but also underpinned with process and ongoing relationship documents.

We also have relationships with our federal partners, including the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Health Canada and, of course, the Public Health Agency of Canada, who have become very dear friends to us of late.

In terms of our model, it is, as I said, unique in Canada, and it involves shared authority and accountability at both the provincial and the municipal level for the delivery of public health programs across the province. As I mentioned, there are 34 individual public health units in Ontario, and each of those units is governed by an independent board of health, which is then responsible for meeting its obligations under the Ontario Public Health Standards, which are made under the Health Protection and Promotion Act.

Those standards set out a number of requirements for things like programs, services and accountability, and we set out the minimum expectations for public health programs and services to be delivered by these boards of health.

The standards are published by the Ministry of Health, and then the boards of health are, as I said, accountable for implementing those standards, including developing program requirements in the related protocol and guidelines. They do that both under provincial guidance but, I think, also recognizing local circumstances of the variable communities that we have across this diverse province.

We consider that actually a strength—the autonomy of the local boards of health—in that it does allow the system to be flexible and responsive to meet those local needs. When we think about the Far North versus some of our urban southern populations, it's quite a variety of needs when you think about public health in general. Then we work with them to effectively coordinate measures, programs, services and responses across the province through the provincial infrastructure.

The ministry also has a partner, Public Health Ontario, which, again, has become a very valuable player in recent weeks. They provide scientific and technical support and advice, including evidence briefs and information on food-borne outbreaks and management, and how to respond to that.

As the Auditor General reported, Ontario has effective systems and procedures in place to inspect about 73,000 food premises and conduct surveillance of food-borne illness and outbreak management. However, the recommendations will help us continually improve the consistency across the local boards of health in the areas of inspection procedures, public disclosure, addressing the emergence of online and home-based food businesses—which I think is an evolving area—and to provide food-safety messaging for Ontarians who prepare food at home.

We will attempt to address all of these recommendations within two years. We have an evergreen approach to updating the public health guidelines and protocols, so we will actively work to include these in that evergreen approach that we take.

Again, we want to thank you for these recommendations. We do feel that they will strengthen our accountability as well as value for money, and lead to continued improvements for food safety.

Of the 21 recommendations made to improve food safety in Ontario, seven of those recommendations are directed to the Ministry of Health and 14 to OMAFRA. But as you'll hear today, we work in close and sometimes seamless participation and partnership to deliver the health food safety system in Ontario.

Today we hope to be able to demonstrate some of the actions that we've taken to date, including taking action for greater consistency across the 34 boards of health, both through some recent regulatory amendments that we're working to implement as well as through the modernization of public health, which we are in the midst of ongoing consultations on.

We thank you, and we look forward to the dialogue today.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Very good. We will start with the government.

Mr. Norman Miller: We're happy to, but I think it's the opposition's turn. We're happy to start, though.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Is the opposition ready?

Mr. John Vanthof: As ready as I'll ever be.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Very good. You'll have 20 minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you. I'm going to start with something that's near and dear to my heart, and that's recommendation 10, regarding incomplete oversight of the Dairy Farmers of Ontario.

I was a dairy farmer for a long time. DFO is changing. They used to self-inspect. A long time ago, OMAFRA used to do it, and then they went to self, and now they're going to third-party regulation. Are you in talks with DFO to find out exactly how they're planning to change that?

Mr. Greg Meredith: Yes. We did take note of the Auditor General's observation that we required more information from DFO on the individual results that they were getting at the producer/farm level, and the actions that they were taking on remediation. My expectation would be that if we do see them moving towards a third-party engagement, that same level of reporting and detail

that we're now asking of them as a result of the observation will continue.

But in terms of our actual progress on DFO, Kelly, did you want to—

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Sure. In terms of the auditor's recommendation around taking a look at the administrative agreement we have with DFO, and strengthening that to ensure that it's really clear that we can ask for information at any time, we've started talks now with Dairy Farmers of Ontario to initiate that, and we'll continue to. So we'll see strengthened reporting back to us in terms of how they're dealing with infractions and providing inspection results.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. Because, to many dairy farmers, it came as a bit of a surprise that they were going to third-party evaluations. So, hopefully, you're going to be working with that.

My next question is: What's going on with goat milk? Goat dairy is a fairly new industry. On a commercial scale, it's a fairly new industry. What the auditor has found is that some of the product has a fairly high bacterial count. What are you doing with those recommendations?

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Mr. Greg Meredith: Yes, you're right. The Auditor General did make an observation that we needed to develop policies that took a risk-based approach to prioritizing findings on farm and goat milk. We are in the process of doing that. We're already developing a protocol to assess the risks and prioritize the responses.

Over the next 12 months, I think that you'll see re-inspection occurring more frequently, and infractions that we've observed will be inspected for remediation. Within 18 months, we should have full compliance policies and an inspection protocol developed and implemented.

Mr. John Vanthof: As an industry with a lot of potential—I think it does—it's very important that we maintain consumer confidence. As a consumer, this doesn't inspire a lot of confidence.

On a goat farm, OMAF is the inspector, right? It used to be, when I was young, with DFO. Does OMAF also provide—is it strictly an inspection role, or does it also provide—I was going to say “adversarial,” but that's not the word I'm looking for—does it provide advice? Because if a producer has a problem—I don't know any farmers who don't want to solve their problem, but sometimes it's beyond their scope of understanding. Does OMAF also play a role there to advise producers on how to improve their product?

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Yes. As part of our inspection role, we do provide that advice and education. We use our full suite of compliance tools, starting with education and outreach in communication as a starting point. Certainly, that's part of our inspection role.

In addition, we do offer training and education on a periodic basis, where needed, where we see a need within the industry as well.

So, yes, as part of our inspection role, that communication, that training, is embedded there.

Mr. John Vanthof: As the numbers of goat farms increased—I think now they're stable, and they might

increase again. Do you have the resources available to do that currently?

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Yes, we've got a really solid team, I think, with our dairy goat inspectors. We ebb and flow with our inspectors and have a flexible workforce that can meet those needs, so I don't see an issue.

Mr. John Vanthof: I would assume that the processors would also have a role in there, right? Because processors don't want milk with a high bacterial count either, so they perhaps would also provide a role in that?

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Our inspectors?

Mr. John Vanthof: No. I don't want to leave the impression—I know that when I sold—goat milk is more often sold direct to a processor, so the processors would also have an interest in improving the overall milk supply for their product.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Absolutely. And if I could just clarify, the number you're raising, I think, in the appendix, in terms of the increase in the samples, that's related to quality thresholds that were changed, so it's more related to the composition of the milk as opposed to food-safety-related. That hopefully helps there.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. But in the presentation we were given, it said that many samples had a high bacterial count. That's not compositional; that's quality.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Right. That's at the farm level. Pasteurization is still needed after there. That puts it in a bit of context.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, but high-bacteria milk at the farm level also impacts the quality after the processing, right?

I'm going to switch gears again. Currently we have 34 local boards of health. Any guess on how many we're going to have next year?

Ms. Melanie Fraser: As you know, last year we announced a modernization of the public health system. We heard loud and clear that the pace and scale of that change was too quick. This was informed by the previous work of the auditor, and recommendations that have been made in terms of how to develop a very nimble public health system that, as we talked about earlier, can be flexible to local needs but one that is effective and consistent and efficient. So we've taken a step back.

As you know, we've hired Jim Pine as an adviser. We've been out doing consultations. I think, to date, we've received something like 400 reports from different submissions from organizations and individuals providing their advice and feedback on how to better organize public health. We've probably met with about 300 participants in six or seven regions.

We did pause for a few weeks last month to allow the public health units to reorient their thinking towards the emerging outbreak at that time, but have since returned to the tables, and those consultations are ongoing.

I would say at this point that there's no definitive number that we're gearing towards. What we're trying to do is build a system that balances that need for consistency with the need for the flexibility, and that drives higher

value and that can implement some of the recommendations, I think, about how we can improve the quality of the system. We're trying to do that in a really thoughtful way, in partnership with municipalities as well as public health experts. We hope to have a report a little later this spring which will guide us on our next step.

I will say that we haven't made a decision that there will be 10 or 14 or 20 or 50. We want to take an evidence-based approach to this that builds the most effective and high-quality system, respecting the evolving nature of public health and its importance in the province.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. I think of everything as local, so from a local perspective, we had the Timiskaming Board of Health—Timiskaming is a very agricultural area—and expand it, let's say, with Sudbury or Timmins, which is mining, which is totally different, right? We've got a lot of little on-farm food providers, which is great. But if they are lost in a health unit that's focused on Sudbury or Timmins—and I don't knock Sudbury or Timmins—then we're not going to provide that equal, autonomous coverage that we're thinking of.

I'll give you an example. We have a farmers' market in Temiskaming Shores, a great little farmers' market, and it is inspected. In Temagami, they have a community market with the same vendors, but many of those vendors were shut down because they're not a farmers' market; they're a community market. But there are no farmers within an hour of Temagami. You cannot get a board.

So I went to our chief medical officer and I said—and this isn't going to sound nice, but I like to tell it the way it is. I said, "Why are you allowing unsafe things to happen to the people of Temiskaming Shores?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, you've chased all the people out of Temagami, but it's fine for Temiskaming Shores to eat that product, right?" The issue was, there's a different rule for farmers' markets than for community markets. Now those vendors are back in, but that had nothing to do—zero—with food safety. That had a lot to do with the lack of understanding of the local conditions. The manager of the community market was very happy when we got the vendors back.

I always use that example, because someday, when the head of that health unit is in Sudbury, I likely won't get that fixed, or somebody won't like it. But it shouldn't have been up to me to get it fixed anyway.

I can't stress enough that I think there has to be a local understanding for public health. Good public health can't come from on high.

When it first was announced and how some of the proposals are big, a lot of people, rightfully so, thought—and are still thinking, and still hoping it doesn't happen—they are going to get lost in the shuffle.

That is a really good example. We run into this all the time in agricultural areas where it's not universal. Northern Ontario is a really good example.

1300

I have five towns in my riding. Two of them have great agricultural bases. If you've been to Verner and the plowing match last year, that's in my riding. But three of

those towns don't understand agriculture at all. The risks are different. I'm not saying they don't have risks; the risks are equal but different. As long as everybody understands that just drawing lines in a map might not protect people—and I can't reiterate that one enough.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: I think it's an excellent example, and I think it speaks entirely to taking this consultative approach and going out in the communities so that the consultations are accessible. Unfortunately, we've earned our air miles or our car miles or whatever. But travelling around the province and actually being out and hearing from people locally is extremely important.

I also think it raises another very important point, which is somewhat the feature of the audit: What things need to be managed locally versus what things are better to have provincial oversight? Then how do you ensure that those two connect seamlessly so that we have the most responsive and highest-quality system that's flexible but also efficient and effective? We hope that this process will leave us with some recommendations that get us closer to that endgame.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. The Auditor General also mentioned that in some cases, the public health unit—and I'm just thinking how this works—didn't have a handle on, for instance, home-based businesses, home-based sales. How are we going to tackle that? That, at least in my level of expertise—whatever there is—is becoming a bigger and bigger issue. Especially now, a lot of people who are get into agriculture realize that traditional agriculture is not easy to get into, but value-added is. Value-added is often adding value by processing and selling as food.

That would provide a bigger workload for the health unit. Are you planning ahead how to handle that?

Dr. David Williams: Dr. Williams here, chief medical officer of health. I think you ask an excellent question, because in the food industry and especially food service provision, it's changing, and it continues to change.

The area you've alluded to there is a very rapidly growing one, just in the last number of years, where individuals, groups and organizations have opened up small, home-based-type organizations. Some were just doing it and people came to their place, but then they started selling and distributing. They didn't acquire any licensing; there was no documentation documenting their existence. So part of the challenge that our public health units have to do is to try and keep track of this. Some are there for a few months and then disappear again. It's not without its challenges. Then how do we do that in such a way that it maintains consistency so that they have to adhere to standards? They have to be noted, listed and licensed. How are the municipalities going to do that in their own respective jurisdictions? When we know they're all there, then we can revisit them on a regular basis. Sometimes our staff in public health units find out and talk to the municipalities, and they don't know about it either. As I said, some are there for a few months and then they disappear again.

How do we standardize that, in a way? How do we protect the public? These are individuals who would often

promote from an entrepreneurial-type approach; they're just trying to make a living. We're not trying to discourage business, but we want to do it in a way that guarantees, ongoing—as the purpose of this audit—the safety of the consumer, who may be assuming that things are done correctly, but their food preparation systems, their refrigeration systems, maintaining all those quality things is not in an establishment; it's in a house. How much is that mixed up with their own personal stuff?

We have to really come to grips with that over the next number of months and years, as we try to be, I guess, considerate of people running a business, but at the same time, saying, "For the protection of the public, you have to be registered. You have to go through some proper inspection. Let our public health inspectors go into your setting, not because we're trying to close you down; we're trying to give you advice and direction on what may be lacking in your setting, where you're putting the public at risk in your preparation processes."

Our inspectors are trained to do that, and they do it with a variety of different settings and organizations. Not everybody has to have the full things, but you do have to have the essential ones there. But then, how do we make sure you have enough staff, that they know where to go, that these ones are official, what kind of business are they doing, and are they selling to the public? Some of them say, "We're just doing to friends. We're just hosting things." Now we're hosting whole catering parties and we have that whole business that's burgeoning and moving out there.

These are all new things. They all need to be monitored and they need to be directed at—I'm not saying the work is not ahead of us; it is, and that's a lot of work to do to keep track of that, working with our municipal partners in that perspective so that their concern, too, of what is happening in their own respective jurisdictions, how their bylaw officers work in that regard and dealing with complaints from public about issues therein—following up on those is an essential part, as noted by the Auditor General.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Just to let you know, Mr. Vanthof, you've got two more minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay, so I'll just finish. There's also a fine line between rigorous inspection and shutting down the ladies' auxiliary with their egg salad sandwiches.

Mr. Joel Harden: As a Legion member, I'll agree to that.

From an urban perspective, one of the things we heard this morning was that Ottawa seems to be doing a relatively good job at inspecting food events that are taking place in open-air circumstances relative to other jurisdictions. I definitely know that as an Ottawa MPP I'm very mindful of the role public health plays in our community, and I would love your opinion on some of the proposals we've heard to expand our catchment area for public health to include as far as Kingston—a much bigger area. Would that compromise or potentially compromise some of the good work that public health in Ottawa is already doing?

Dr. David Williams: I'll answer that. I think you're getting back to the modernization in our review. The

concept is that we do not want to decrease front-line staff operations at all. What do we need is to make sure that they have what they need to do their job in a very changing and altering reality with technology, so that they have enough information to support them in that capacity, so that the services that are provided right now by the KFL&A—Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington—health unit would still be the same front-line services?

We cannot decrease what the Ontario Public Health Standards require, but then, can we improve on that? Where are the gaps in services, talking to our professional groups of inspectors to see what other ancillary support services they need to do their job more effectively and more efficiently, where new things are opening up, where new things are happening with the complexities around laboratory technology? That needs to be done, and that's the work of our Public Health Ontario laboratory system, and with OMAFRA, working in partnership. But how do you do that in a way that expedites that process? Because you get the samples in, the right samples, the right packaging—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you, Mr. Williams. That was almost right on the spot. We'll move to the government side for 20 minutes. Mr. Miller.

Mr. Norman Miller: Let me begin by thanking you all for being here today. Chief Medical Officer Williams, especially, thank you for coming in, with all the good work you're doing with COVID-19. I was certainly a little surprised to see that you were able to be here, but we're thankful that you're able to take a couple of hours to spend with us.

Certainly, in looking at this report, I think it's a good report, and I think it should give people confidence in the food system in Ontario. I think it's positive to see the way the ministry is working with the Auditor General's office to try to address the concerns raised by the Auditor General's office. I think that generally it's a pretty positive report and there are some constructive suggestions in it that you seem to be acting on, from what I've seen so far.

I'm going to ask a few questions, and I know we have other members of our caucus who want to ask questions, so I won't be in any logical form here. I'll be jumping around a bit.

Starting with recommendation 1, to do with meat and inspections, the auditor found that 98% of meat at provincially inspected slaughterhouses that the Minister of Agriculture randomly tested were good, but 2% of the cases were positive for drug residue test results. The main concern with that was that there was no follow-up with the farmers who raised the animals to know whether it was going to happen again with the same farmers. So I'm just wondering what steps you're taking to track those farmers and address that 2% situation.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Thank you for your observations about the report. You're quite right: 98% is a very good mark, I would say, but not good enough. So we have to look into how we address that 2%. Our protocol right now involves, of course, identifying and detaining a carcass that we suspect might have residues, and testing for those.

We also work with the processing plant to alert them to what we've found. It is accurate that we work through the processor to deal with the actual producer.

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One of the challenges we have in identifying the farmer, of course, is that these animals go through a fairly complicated value chain from farm to processing plant, and it isn't always possible for us to seek out and to find who that farmer was. We also—

Mr. Norman Miller: Sorry; are you working with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency on it?

Mr. Greg Meredith: Yes. In addition to identifying the problem with the meat processing plant or the stand-alone slaughter operation—which, you can imagine, has a significant interest in identifying the source of the problem and making sure it's mitigated—we do work with the CFIA to alert them to the finding. Very frequently, we will rely on them, and we have relied on them in the past, to trace back to the farm.

Now, I think it was—

Mr. Norman Miller: I thought with animals that they were all very specifically identified for disease etc., so that you would know exactly where an animal came from.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Yes, if there is the animal traceability system in place. Up until, I believe, two years ago, we were relying on CFIA to do that trace back. They have since stopped doing that, and so, as part of our response to the recommendation, we are pursuing with them whether or not we shouldn't restart that protocol, use the traceability system back to the farm and alert the farmer about the residue finding.

Mr. Norman Miller: Okay. That's good to hear.

I know in our discussions this morning, when we were being briefed, Mr. Vanthof, who is a farmer—we were talking about this specific issue, and he said that sometimes the farmer might not be aware, and they would probably want to know this information. He said that in the great majority of cases, the farmers would want to know and would want to fix the problem, but they might not be aware. I guess that there might be some who wouldn't be so good, as well, but the great majority of them would want to do the right thing.

Mr. Greg Meredith: If the Chair would allow me, I would like to comment on that observation. It's similar to the other member's observation about what farmers—the investment that they have in doing the job well is very significant. Farmers are the first line of defence in food safety. I think you could be very confident that farmers in Ontario are very strong stewards of animal health, plant health and food safety. I think that most of them, if not all, would be very responsive to any indication that they need to improve one practice or another.

I do want to mention again that the issue of public confidence is really quite critical. There are issues of food safety, but there are also issues of public trust and social licence that we have to preserve. We have to preserve it on behalf of the entire value chain in agriculture so that people are confident in the quality and safety of the food that they're eating. That's a very important requirement

for our farmers to remain successful, for our processors to remain successful.

I think you're absolutely right: Most farmers would respond very positively to any indication of a finding.

Mr. Norman Miller: Getting back to that recommendation, in the session we had this morning, you commented, John, that if a farmer knew the issue, they would probably react and want to do something proactively, so I'm wondering about the recommendation to actually formally penalize. It seems to me that that would be less effective than just communicating in this circumstance.

I think the recommendation was to formally penalize farmers who continue to sell animals with drug—or maybe there should be a high threshold so that you at least give them a chance to just do the right thing first.

Mr. John Vanthof: Communicate first.

Mr. Norman Miller: Communicate first. I would agree with that. Most farmers, I believe, are trying to do the right job. Communication would be the first thing, before you bring the hammer down. That's what I would suggest.

Mr. Greg Meredith: In fact, that is part of our—I think you'd call it a progressive compliance continuum, where our first interventions are about, as the member had said earlier and as you're observing, interfacing with a farmer to make sure that they understand the systems that they're using, to make sure they understand how to mitigate a problem, before we move into enforcement and penalties.

It's also not our jurisdiction in this particular case of drug residues, but we can use that progressive compliance approach to make sure that there are many mitigation opportunities well before serious fines or enforcement.

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you. I'm going to switch completely now to recommendation 19, which is more within the public health units area.

The finding was that the five public health units visited for the auditor “did not investigate complaints of food-borne illnesses on a timely basis.” There was a recommendation: “To improve the effectiveness and consistency of the complaints investigations relating to potential exposures ... we recommend”—I think there was a two-day complaint, and I was actually surprised by that. I was in the resort business for 30 years and had regular inspections from the Simcoe Muskoka health unit, so a bit of first-hand experience in that regard. I would think, both as an operator and for the health unit, that if there was something serious with the food, the notification should be immediate, not in two days. That may not require an inspection, but it would at the very least require a phone call.

So I'm surprised that the required outcome isn't an immediate contact of some kind, because as an operator, I'm sure if I knew that there was some problem with the food being served or water being used—the operator would want to know about it right away. Most are responsible operators. Maybe I'll put it to the public health folks to comment on that.

Dr. David Williams: Like you said, we've taken that recommendation and we're trying to understand, working with the auditor's office, that when you talk about a food inspection of a premises within two days—like you said,

the first thing is a phone call to get some clarification. Having been in a local MOH, it was usually my expectation that if we received a complaint, the phone call back to the complainant would be carried out fairly quickly. Would that result in an inspection within the next few hours? Not necessarily. There's information to be gathered in that.

Mr. Norman Miller: So the two-day limit doesn't preclude an immediate action, then?

Dr. David Williams: Not in my mind. The immediate action is to make sure that the person is contacted to clarify what the point was that the concern was raised over. That tells you the risk or the hazard and how quickly you have to move on it, to go to look at an inspection. There sometimes are complaints around what they thought they saw that people were doing. Some people said they ingested something; they had something to show, that it was in the food, a hazardous material. You'd want to move on that fairly quickly, on different issues.

There are a variety of different responses that the public health inspectors—usually inspectors, in this case. When they receive that, they want to assess the information, get back to the person, gather as much as they can from the complainant, then assess the risk situation, decide what else they have to call and contact, and then just set up the time before they're going to go and do the inspection of the premises. But if it's an urgent issue, and they render it as urgent and necessary, they'll go fairly quickly to the organization and do an inspection if it seems that there's a risk or a threat right at that time.

Mr. Norman Miller: Are there very many complaints that are received? I'm trying to get a sense of them. Are some of them sort of frivolous things that aren't really food health and safety matters, and others are more serious?

Dr. David Williams: We take all complaints seriously. People are calling for different reasons. One is to make a complaint, but one is to make a comment or statement, and sometimes the inspector is trying to carry out an educational process with the person who is asserting a certain problem or issue in that setting, so there's a public education aspect involved in that too. It may seem like a frivolous one, but obviously to that person it has been important enough for them to get on the phone and contact, or send an email, and ask the health unit in that area for an answer.

So I don't think we think they're frivolous, because even if it wasn't a high-risk situation, it is one that needs education and awareness, and to deal with that at the person's point of entry into that, for that knowledge translation—we use that term. We get many calls all the time, and that's part of the business of public health inspection. Some have—Toronto has an immense number daily that come in, and that's just part of the daily routine and work, to go through those and deal with them, filter them, and to deal with them appropriately.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Can I also add that I think part of the Auditor General's recommendation was related to the consistency across public health units in terms of that level

of response? To the discussion throughout the day about the variability of circumstances—probably volumes and the nature of complaints across the province. It is important to make sure that we have tools that can support a consistent approach and meet the timelines that Dr. Williams described.

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We will be working to review and provide advice into a tool that can then be shared across the 34 public health units currently to help to bring that level of consistency so that again the service standard is the same whether you're in Timiskaming or in downtown Toronto.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Mr. Miller, we have the input of the AG.

Mr. Norman Miller: Yes. Please, Auditor, jump in.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: Yes. I was going to echo what the associate deputy minister said. When we pointed out the 80%—the target is within two days, and 80% were meeting that target. Our issue was that there were 20% that weren't meeting that target, and those needed to be looked at a little bit closer. But there was a realization that once somebody complains, they may be asked to produce some evidence that has to be analyzed before an inspector is sent to the site. So it was the 20% that we thought needed more attention.

Mr. Norman Miller: And two days might be too long if it was—I don't know—chicken that had salmonella in it.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: I think the chief medical officer—it would depend on the type of issue that was asked to be addressed, yes.

Mr. Norman Miller: Yes. Thank you. And for my last question, switching to recommendation 7 on the licensing of fish producing, the recommendation “to appropriately address food safety concerns in dual facilities that both process fish and sell it”: You're recommending joint inspections. I'm just wondering: Does that mean the Ministry of Agriculture and public health units at the same time? What exactly does that mean? Is it practical and how do you do it?

Then I'll pass it on to Mr. Parsa.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Here we go. Thank you. I'm going to have to master this button-pushing stuff at some point.

We are coordinating and have opened up conversations with our public health colleagues on that issue of fish processing in the back and the retail operation in the front. The issue is not just the food safety issue, of course, but it is an efficiency and open-for-business impact, if you will. It's very consistent with the government's priority to maintain public health standards, to maintain food safety standards, but maybe do it a bit smarter so that we're inspecting at the same time.

Yes, we are going to be working to elaborate our MOU with our public health colleagues to see if we can expand the opportunities to do joint inspections. That just alleviates the burden on the establishment, and it maintains the assurance that we've got food safety front and back.

Mr. Norman Miller: So that doesn't mean there are two different inspectors going at the same time? It might be one inspector doing it for both?

Mr. Greg Meredith: That's an interesting observation as well. That is one of the things that we're looking at more broadly as part of the government's open-for-business strategies: Can we cross-certify our inspectors—I'm talking generally in the government—to do more than one type of inspection?

Right now, we have certain protocols. The Auditor General did advise us that we should be sharing more of those strategies with our public health colleagues in the area of high-risk foods. Right now, we're not doing that, as I understand it, but there is an opportunity and we are exploring as a government where those opportunities are to do cross-certification, cross-training, so that our inspector, for example, would be able to apply the same standards at the front of the shop, at the foodservice establishment level, as the public health unit and vice versa.

We're not there; I have to be honest. Right now, we are talking about two people inspecting to their standard at the appropriate level with the appropriate risk assessments in two establishments. But rather than visiting twice, we're visiting once, and that's at least a step in the right direction of alleviating red tape.

Mr. Norman Miller: I have a business—I won't name them—in my riding. They grow trout, and then they also smoke it and they make paté and they retail it and wholesale it. You're bringing in licensing. So that's the sort of business that would be covered by licensing; is that correct?

Mr. Greg Meredith: Yes.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Yes. We have just put in place a new fish regulation under the Food Safety and Quality Act that will bring licensing into the fold. That was one of the auditor's recommendations as well: to have fish processors licensed. For high-risk fish processors, they will now be licensed by OMAFRA under the Food Safety and Quality Act—

Mr. Norman Miller: And high risk is if you're smoking or processing?

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Smoking and processing—yes, exactly—vacuum packing and that kind of high-risk activity.

So that's good news in one area that we've certainly moved forward on from the auditor's recommendations.

Mr. Norman Miller: Okay.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Mr. Parsa, we're at just about two minutes left on the clock.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Two minutes? Perfect.

Very quickly, I want to thank you for being here. It helps us immensely. I want to thank you for talking about public trust and confidence. I know the minister has been working really hard. In fact, our government has to make sure that that happens.

You talked about food safety. On the 80% and 20%, I just want to make sure I understand. Is it priority when complaints come in? Are they prioritized, when calls and complaints come in? Can you tell me about that, please?

Dr. David Williams: Yes, and I think directors—we consult all the time with our association of public health inspectors in our protocols that we lay out in our Ontario Public Health Standards. Those lay it out, and we have dialogue and discussion.

If we have to improve upon those and put those in, we put some notes here and we'll address that again, looking at it as our annual regular review of our Ontario Public Health Standards. Then the protocols are much more tasked, as in detailed policies and procedures. If we have to tighten that up, if we find there are some gaps and spaces, we would do so to ensure that the 80% goes to 100% on that level there. Sometimes it may be that there is a need to do some addressing of variation of what the call means and that aspect there.

Certainly, the directors and the inspectors will prioritize. It depends on what's the potential for an outbreak of disease. If it looks like it's substantial, you want to move on that fairly quickly, and they can usually gain that by interviewing and talking with the complainant. If they can't, they have to try to get a hold of the complainant, and that may not be easy. They may have sent an email, and you have to follow up with them. That does take some time. But you still have to move as expeditiously as you can.

You may have a history already with that establishment, so you want to do your cross-records and maybe one of your peers has done something further, and you want to cross over and consult with that one to say, "Is this similar to what you heard, and what can I gain by understanding this better?" Because establishments sometimes have a history of compliance here, or a lack therein, and you want to make sure you understand the context of what you're dealing with and to be as informed as you can, as you undertake the investigation.

But we still would like to make sure that at least the calls are returned 100% and that we can start the process. Then that could result in an on-site inspection, when appropriate, and what you're going to go with in to target that inspection, based on the complaint.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Dr. Williams. You've run out the clock again—right on the dot.

We'll move back to the opposition for another 20-minute round. Mr. Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: In my initial, I forgot to thank you for being here. I would have to say that, in Ontario, we all feel very safe with the work you're doing, and we will continue to feel safe.

But I'm going to get back to recommendation number 1. It just hit me: For a farmer to ship an animal that has drug residue, there's actually no way to test that animal on the farm. I ship milk. Every load of milk that leaves my farm, we could test it. So if we had an animal that we had treated with antibiotics, we would follow the instructions on the prescription, or if the vet had a separate prescription, we would follow that. There is a test available and we tested before the milk is put in a tank, and each load of milk that leaves the farm is also tested.

But for me, for the farmers who are doing something, or their employer who is doing something, they don't know, conceivably, until that carcass is tested. I learned something today; I learn something every day. But CFIA—I always assumed, when I put the RFID tag in the calf, or in the cow, that that tag followed that right to the steak. That's no longer being done?

Ms. Kelly McAslan: I think there are a number of parts to your question.

Just in terms of the drug residue issue: First and foremost, we provide significant outreach and education up front, across industry. We've done a significant role in that. Under our Canadian Agricultural Partnership, we recently funded a farmed animal stewardship program, which is a huge information hub full of resources across industry, around appropriate use of livestock medicine. That's been really well received.

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As you said, under the care of a veterinarian, livestock medicines can be prescribed, so that's one control piece in there. Certainly, our authority at the plant level—with our provincial plants, we do take action. When we do find that there are animals with drug residues, either through surveillance or ongoing monitoring, we take immediate action. We notify the CFIA, we provide them with the results, we follow up with the plant, we take compliance actions with the plants and we ask the plant to follow up with the producers that they source their animals from, so that they can have that conversation with the producer as well.

We try to do a number of things in this space. As the auditor pointed out, it is fairly low levels that we're seeing. But we'll continue to work with the CFIA on moving forward, and we've said we'll continue to provide our results to them and work together with them on that.

Mr. John Vanthof: But in previous testimony, you said that the CFIA has changed what they do in the last couple of years. Could you elaborate on that?

Ms. Kelly McAslan: My understanding is that, yes, the CFIA used to go to the producer level and do more of that compliance. They do do that when the risk is high. My understanding is that they do still take that action when they warrant that and when they can do the trace-back. As the deputy said, the trace-back can be challenging at times.

We'll continue to work with them to let them know when there are adverse results and ask them to share what their actions have been in terms of follow-up, with us.

Mr. John Vanthof: I think the agriculture community would want—because traceability is very important to us, too, and very important to the people we sell our products to.

An issue that Mr. Miller brought up regarding fish processing and cross-inspection: I think that's a very good point, especially for small processors. I have a processor in my riding. It's an abattoir. They sell meat and they smoke fish. What's frustrating is when they have three different inspection processes. They want to comply, but they're always behind the eight ball because they're always in the middle of an inspection process. If they had

one very rigorous inspection process that they could pass, it actually would make it more viable for them—and I think you're working in that direction. It would make it more viable for the processor but actually would increase safety, too. I think that's a good point.

I don't know which recommendation it is—organic: I've never been an organic producer. I'm not a big believer. But people who buy organic deserve, when they're paying extra for organic, to be confident that it is, actually, organic. How are we going to move forward because—people believe it's more healthy, and it could be; I'm not qualified to say. But they should have the confidence, when they're paying twice as much or 30% more for X, that it is actually X. How can we move forward with that?

Mr. Greg Meredith: Well, that is, as my colleague said earlier, a multi-dimensional question.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm good at those.

Mr. Greg Meredith: It is an ongoing challenge, because from a food safety perspective, we don't distinguish between organic or other production systems. You're absolutely right: Some consumers do feel it's a health issue. We don't subscribe to that, and most inspection agencies do not. So the choice of organic is one of consumer preference.

But the issue of labelling and integrity in labelling is quite critical. It is an offence to knowingly mislead or mislabel food. We had an incident of that not too long ago in southern Ontario, and I think the fine was in the range of \$40,000 for implying that a product was organic when it was not. That's very significant. And you're absolutely right—again, going to this issue of public confidence, consumers do have to have faith that the value chain is producing not just high-quality food but that they're producing the food that they claim to be producing. So that labelling issue is quite important.

On the issue of an organic standard, we actually do have, in Canada, a federally regulated organic standard by the CFIA. Our Foodland Ontario brand, if you will, exploits that by saying that a grown-in-Ontario organic product is one, of course, that meets the standards of "grown in Ontario," as established by our Foodland Ontario operation, but also is compliant with the Canadian organic food standard that the CFIA sets.

We took the Auditor General's observations to heart on organics. We are having discussions with the sector, ongoing discussions with our organic producers. But, like I said, it doesn't reach the level of a food safety issue at this stage.

Mr. John Vanthof: It's a consumer confidence issue, right?

I think my colleague has a question.

Mr. Joel Harden: I was going to follow up on this very thing. It is a huge issue in Ottawa. I'm sure that in many urban settings, a lot of consumers are interested in organic products.

I can think of an exhibitor in many of our downtown farmers' markets who prides herself on selling meat fed only through food waste, food she has rescued in contracts

with 42 different major supermarkets—10 tonnes a week. I'm not allowed to name the business, am I? I'll get in trouble with the ethics commissioner. But she's a fantastic operator, very popular, and has complained to me several times—every time I see her—that she wished the organic industry that is distributed and sold in Ontario was held to the same standard she applies to her own business.

I note in your recommendation 12 that you are considering having the federal standard apply to all products labelled as organic. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on the likelihood of us seeing a change like that happen. Because I think, at the end of the day, what it does to operators like the one I was discussing, who is trying to hold herself and her organization to a high level, catering to a market that's very, very much real and alive and lucrative—I think it diminishes her business if we allow the made-and-distributed-in-Ontario organics standard to be—if I'm reading your information correctly, and from what she has told me too—a little less than it is to be believed. What do you think?

Mr. Greg Meredith: Well, of course, that is a policy question. I'm not sure we said we were actually proceeding down that line or considering it, but it is a live issue in Ontario, and we do see a number of organic producers seeking out an Ontario brand.

The one thing I would add, though, is what we are balancing very frequently in this segment of the business is the need for the farmer to adhere to many different standards. As you probably are aware and committee members are aware, a farmer is meeting all kinds of legislated, regulated standards that stem from government oversight, and that's important. But they're also meeting all kinds of standards, like CanadaGAP, for example, the Good Agricultural Practices standard, that are imposed by the value chain, or by their own particular commodity group or association. So they're complying with a number of different quality standards that are demanded by various players in the system.

In the case of organic, there is a national standard. Right now, I would guess, you have to balance the value of an additional Ontario standard that would somehow be somewhat different—

Mr. Joel Harden: No, I certainly wasn't alluding to that. I'm just looking at recommendation 12 here of the auditor's report, which notes, "consider having organic food produced and consumed in Ontario certified to the federal Canadian Organic Standards," not a new standard.

It would seem to me, from a consumption perspective, that would be very valuable for consumers, and, frankly, for producers who are producing high-quality product to not be undermined by an operator that doesn't have to make those investments but is able to advertise them the same way.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Right now, there is nothing preventing an individual grower or producer from complying with the Canadian standard and labelling their product that way. That's an option that is available to them right now.

Mr. Joel Harden: I had two other questions. One was—I apologize for being a little late; it may have already been covered, so you can just say that. With COVID-19, a lot of the information that has been made available to me in our office is the link to really questionable practices in large-scale factory farming in China in the transmission and generation of this virus. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on that. When I'm talking about large-scale, I'm talking about much bigger than anything I've ever heard in the Canadian context. Do you have anything that you can share from a public health perspective on that front?

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Dr. David Williams: Sure. You raise a very good question, because we're dealing with these types of coronaviruses. By their history, they tend to be zoonotic in source. Much like we did with the SARS—it went back to civet cats. It takes a while to trace it back there. And then with the MERS-CoV, it's dromedary camels that tend to be a host, and they tend to carry it. At times, if you're in contact with them in any way, you start to then move it over to the human side. The virus can go back and forth. Sometimes it causes an uptake in the human vector, and you start getting the ability to actually start to assimilate and produce and be transmittable. Many of them are happening all the time in our environment.

In the situation there, when you're talking about large numbers and sources, it's going to be who the Chinese government—because, you remember, it started in a marketplace in Wuhan. By the time they became aware of it—they're trying to ascertain what was happening there. This is a massive, large set-up, with a wide variety of products, of materials that people could acquire in the raw material and other ones.

There are many hypotheses being put forward as to what might have been the source, and some are very unique food items that people have gotten into the habit of consuming. This puts exposure at an increased rate of people consuming and then interacting with the vector, in that sense, with the transmission of these organisms. It creates more potential for it then to mutate across and to then sometimes become such that it can replicate in the human host and then sometimes actually be transmittable. That's why we always talk about these pandemic-type situations in there. When it starts that movement out, then you go from to person to person, and that's what at least they feel is the epicentre of that having occurred.

They did find it in some environmental swabs in the market. They have not found the zoonotic source per se. They have some theories, I believe. I'm not sure how much they're working on that at the moment. If it is, it's behind the scenes as they try to come out from under the deluge of the human illness and the system aspects in there.

I don't think it has been attributed to large farm situations, but there's such a huge interaction there, in some local settings, very much between the humans and those species. They're in very close proximity, not like you'd think about with the barn way over there. You've actually

got it right below the house, and especially with live animals and different species—which I think they're trying to improve on, but makes it an unfortunate petri dish that can result in this cross-mutation across into the human side there.

So it's something that has been of concern, and we're waiting to see if they find if there was a zoonotic source and what they might identify in that regard.

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): You've got four and a half minutes.

Mr. Joel Harden: How many?

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Four and a half.

Mr. Joel Harden: Okay. Well, I'll try to make this one succinct. I know something that has come up at the Ontario Legislature in the past, in previous sittings of Parliaments here, is—and again, it doesn't speak for the vast majority of operators in the agricultural sector—working conditions for migrant workers, and some of the challenging situations where and by workers are often put in situations where situations can be compromised. I noticed that that wasn't noted in any of the auditor's report in factoring into outcomes. Again, I'm speaking specifically for the minority of the bad operators here, but I'm wondering if there could be some reflection on that.

Mr. Norman Miller: Just a question, Chair, about what this has to do with the actual report.

Mr. Joel Harden: The report was on food safety inspection programs and what they pick up, so I'm just wondering if working conditions factor into this. It just wasn't something that was mentioned. It was something flagged to me over my lunch break.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: Yes, that wasn't an item that we did look at in the audit. So we did not look at that.

Mr. Joel Harden: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Three minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. Recommendation item number 4: glyphosate and that there should be sample testing. Your response is that you are starting a testing program on fresh fruit and vegetables. That's not the medium that I would picture glyphosate being in. Is there a specific reason, or is it because that's the closest to the consumer?

Mr. Greg Meredith: I think, in part, that question is for the Auditor General, but I can tell you why we responded in the way we did.

Just by way of background, glyphosate is a very commonly used pesticide, primarily for soy and corn crops. That's the majority of field crops in Ontario and so a very important input to keep our farmers competitive—to make sure that they have the best possible input tools available.

It is demonstrably safe and has been re-registered very recently by the Pest Management Regulatory Agency. They've got a process of, every 15 years, re-examining the science to see if the science tells you anything more about the risks of a given input like glyphosate. In this case, they recertified it. What they did do, though, is change some of the application strategy, so that protects the farmer or the

applicator. But as far as food safety goes, it's a perfectly safe tool.

It isn't used directly on fruit and vegetables. Those of you who would know the business would know it would kill those products. It doesn't kill soy and corn because those products are grown to be glyphosate-resistant.

I think the auditor and her team made that observation—and I don't want to speak for you—but there is the issue of adventitious presence. You've got one field. You're spraying your soy or your corn. You've got another field of produce—a tree orchard or what have you—so that's a risk. It's a small risk, but, again, going back to the issue of public confidence, we took a look at that observation to say, "Okay. Well, they're picking up on something here that's pretty important from a social licence/public confidence perspective for our farmers. That is a risk, that there's this adventitious presence, an unintended presence, on a field crop. Let's do the testing on a sampling basis. Let's share the results with CFIA and PMRA, what we find."

It's adding to the body of knowledge around glyphosate. It is a concern to consumers, and we want to make sure that we're being responsive to those concerns, to make sure that our value chain continues to be held in high regard.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): I'll have to keep you there, Mr. Meredith, and move to the government side for the 20-minute rotation. Mr. Parsa.

Mr. Michael Parsa: I'm going to be very quick, because a couple of my colleagues really want to ask some questions.

I want to echo my colleagues about the confidence being high in our system—to your point about 98% not being good enough and we can do even better. That explains why, generally, this report is so positive.

I have a question. If you could tell me about a typical inspection and what it looks like, either at a meat plant, a dairy plant—what does a typical inspection look like?

Ms. Kelly McAslan: First, maybe I'll back up and just say that we have a really comprehensive food inspection system. The goal is really to prevent risks and hazards in the first place. We have inspections and audit and sampling and testing and enforcement, all as part of the bucket of things that we look at.

Certainly, working in conjunction with industry—it ultimately is industry's responsibility to adhere to the regulatory requirements we set out and to ensure safe food, but we work with them to ensure we're working to bring them into compliance.

In terms of a typical inspection, it varies a little bit depending on which commodity—if we're talking about meat versus dairy versus goat etc.—but there are some general things that would be consistent. One of the things that our inspectors would look for is sanitation: making sure that everything is clean and safe in the environment, first and foremost; structure, making sure that the equipment and the buildings are structurally safe, and there's no worry about leakages or anything like that that would be concerning from a food safety perspective; making sure

that the proper plans are in place, whether it's pest control plans and things; making sure that traceability and documentation are all in place as well; and, again, equipment maintenance and making sure that's all sound.

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In a meat plant, it's a little more specific. With slaughter plants and abattoirs, our inspectors are actually in there every time a slaughter is conducted. So our meat inspectors are there every day there's a slaughter, and they're inspecting animals before, so ante-mortem, looking for any health or animal welfare concerns; during slaughters, to make sure that that's all done in a humane way; and then, after slaughter, they're looking at the carcass and the organs to make sure, again, that there are no animal health concerns or disease concerns. If there is, then that's where our inspectors would immediately triage with a veterinarian to do a further assessment and determine next steps.

Multiple things are being looked at by our inspectors at all times. Where there are issues or concerns, certainly action is being taken at plants and with the regulated community to ensure that those are addressed.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you. I did have a couple of follow-ups, but I will pass and move on to produce sampling.

The audit showed that during the sampling, about 3.7% of samples came back with adverse results between 2018 and 2019. I just want to know what actions the ministry has taken to prevent this food from entering the supply and how to ensure that the producers are taking appropriate measures to prevent future occurrences.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Certainly we have an ongoing monitoring and sampling program for our foods of plant origin. When there are issues addressed and adverse results come back, we take immediate action. We notify the CFIA. They conduct a risk assessment. We also work with our farmers to educate them on proper use of pesticides and make sure that they are clear in terms of what actions they need to take going forward to address any adverse impacts.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you.

Chair, I'll pass it along.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Maybe just a more comprehensive question: I believe that certainly North America's food system—I have great confidence in it. I walk into a restaurant, whether it's a chain or a small one, and you don't even think about that—unless maybe it's a very small restaurant, and you never see any customers and maybe the food has been sitting on the shelf too long. I think of other countries where I personally have been affected—you can use that expression "Montezuma's revenge"—or meals that I've had in India; no offence. I'm just talking about personal experience.

So I have that perception, but then I read in the Auditor General's report—I'm surprised to see this—that contaminated food kills 70 people in Ontario annually. It talks about other examples of morbidity and mortality in hospital visits, and I just find that kind of counterintuitive.

So perhaps a quick comment from both agriculture and public health?

I'll say, too, that I've been on a kill floor. We've done it on our farms in the past with poultry and with hogs. I've personally done that when we didn't maybe have the rules we have now. I've been on a kill floor in South America, as well, and there's no refrigeration, or there wasn't when I was down there. Where are we at on this? Do we have the safest food in the world or do we not?

Mr. Greg Meredith: I would say that our systems are amongst the safest and produce amongst the safest food in the world. I would say that as a country, we have some of the most rigorous systems for production, as well as inspection, testing and sampling, in the world. We have a very significant stake from a human health perspective, as you've pointed out, in making sure that that's so, but we also have a reputational risk internationally, on which a very substantial stream of income is earned, largely on the basis of Canadian food quality and Ontario food quality for those companies that are shipping food abroad. It's incredibly important from a health perspective and an incredibly important element of economic success in Ontario for our farmers and our processors.

No human health risk is acceptable, but eliminating all risk is impossible. I would guess that on the scale of illnesses, it's a relatively small source of illness and mortality—an unfortunate reality, though, as you've observed. I think that's why the system is so effective at eliminating food-borne illness because it is a serious health risk if it's not controlled and managed carefully.

Now, the only thing I could say about the 70 number is that our CFIA colleagues would tell us that most food-borne illness and most food contamination occurs during the cooking process, and that occurs mostly in the home. That's an unfortunate reality, that food handling in the home is often a source of risk that has to be managed. The other element, I would say, from an Ontario inspection point of view is that I think 55% of our food is actually sourced in other provinces and sourced internationally, so the food inspection systems have to cover not just what we produce here, but what we import.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Okay.

Mr. Greg Meredith: So when you think about the vectors of risk and how vast they could be—you've observed other countries that have very significant food-borne illness problems in their systems—we are doing relatively well by comparison.

There's always a need to improve, and that's what our whole posture was with the Auditor General. If there's a way to improve, we want to find it. We want to understand it. That's what I would say. I've talked—

Mr. Toby Barrett: Maybe public health—I know I have trouble keeping the cat off the counter. I had trouble keeping a chocolate Lab off the counter at one time—

Mr. Greg Meredith: I'm not coming to dinner.

Dr. David Williams: Yes. I would agree with Deputy Meredith that a lot of it is in the food preparation side. One of the big challenges of public health is when we get these cases to track down where the source is, because the

person may have been seen in the emergency department, getting assessed, and then we find out the organism, and then they get their food history tracking back—"What did you make yesterday?"—and they can't remember what they made two or three days ago. If you ask yourself, you're not too sure exactly what you did.

Then, if you start getting clusters and groups, it's like detective work and it's the fascination of food safety, trying to trace back to see if there has been a system failure or if it's an operator not doing the proper preparation of the food and not being cautious. I think the aspect of the home is one of the things—you hear a complaint from someone who names a large retailer, you go to the house and there's fungus in food in the fridge. You're going, "Whoa, what's going on here?"

I think that because we have such a good food system as compared to some other areas, we've gotten complacent. We make assumptions and sometimes we're a bit casual in how we handle food. We keep trying to bring that message back about handling poultry, cooking the turkey until it's done and all those kinds of things there. We keep trying to do education that there's the proper way and there are improper ways. We can't give up on that. We have to keep that messaging going strong.

Sometimes in some of the processing systems and in the restaurant industry there may be an employee who is being less than diligent in their duties and responsibilities or continually making errors and mistakes. They're putting raw food above the cooked food that's dripping down on it, and you have this kind of thing. We call this our hazardous analysis and critical control points. That's a long title, but that's where the inspector goes in and looks at the processes through there: Where are all the key parts where mistakes can be made? Temperature control etc. is always a problem.

People do that. They make food for a large gathering, it's in the back of the car, they get distracted and it sits there for four or five hours. They serve it up and then, before you know it, everybody's sick. What happens is that some unfortunately get quite ill, especially with our older population. Sometimes with other comorbidities it is more than just a gastrointestinal Montezuma's revenge, if you may; it may go on to more serious consequences, hospitalization and, unfortunately in a few cases, death.

It's not to be taken lightly. These are still out there. Microorganisms are alive and well. They have not gone away, and we have to be vigilant in how we handle that and be aware of what the risks are. I think you raise a very good point.

Mr. Toby Barrett: We know that our boards of health are required, where there are problems with certain restaurants, to post inspection reports or inspection results on a website. I don't know whether people go on those websites. I assume that would have the potential to close the restaurant, obviously, and maybe it'd bounce back to agriculture. I know that in the report, here and there we see a call for greater transparency and—I don't know whether it was with abattoirs—a call for the inspection reports to be made more public, I assume even if there was no fine,

for example, or sanction. I'm worried about that. That could shut down an abattoir, I suppose. Just a comment on that?

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Ms. Kelly McAslan: Sure. Currently, we post on our website—anyone that we license in OMAFRA through our food safety and inspection programs is posted publicly, so anyone can see who gets licensed. We also post some aggregate data, some high-level data, on our inspection programs, and we do post where there are convictions and penalties resulting in a fine that have been proven in court. So that's already posted.

The auditor's recommendation asks to look deeper in terms of if there's any further disclosure or steps we could consider, going forward. We have committed to work with partners across ministries, including with the Ministry of Health, to try and be consistent, to look at options in terms of disclosure and what we might consider doing, further than what we already have.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Okay. Again, on the perception of food safety and contaminants: We've just gone through the winter season of farm meetings. The trends I've noticed: well, the weather—everybody is talking about the weather at the meetings—prices, international trade and the various trade deals that we've been going through for the last several years. It's so important to sell beef to South Korea, for example.

Mr. Stan Cho: It's a good place.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Yes, it's good beef too.

China—the problem is North American shipments of soybeans to China. Oftentimes, artificial trade barriers are put up, as I understand it, by the importing country. They say, “Well, okay, there's a contaminant in it, or certain growing procedures don't meet our standards. Surprise!” I think it's an unfair trade practice, on occasion. So there it is, sitting at the dock.

I think of BSE. We played by the rules; I felt that the United States didn't, on that one. To what extent are we going down a dangerous road here? Because we are operating in a very competitive, hostile global environment with respect to trade.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Well, I could comment on that from a number of different directions. You know that, of course, the province is very involved in trade negotiations, and a very prominent aspect of provincial involvement is about agriculture, both in terms of access to those markets and in terms of protecting our sensitive sectors, particularly in supply management. So the province has invested a great deal in ensuring that we are connected at every necessary point in the trade policy development process and have very strong relationships with the federal government, with Global Affairs and Agriculture Canada, to that end.

You quite rightly observe that in the last 12 to 18 months, we've seen increased trade friction that has been manifest in a number of ways. One is institutional. At the WTO, the appeal process there has been grinding to a halt because of the failure of some countries to appoint

adjudicators to that appeal process, and that's a key part of the enforcement of the trade rules system.

We've also seen, some would say, the politicization of trade. You're quite right that with at least one of our major trading partners, China, we've had difficulties with canola, durum wheat, soy and a number of products, including beef and pork, that directly affect Ontario producers and processors. The only thing I could say there is that Canada has got a very sophisticated engagement strategy with our foreign trading partners. We work with CFIA to make sure that our producers' and processors' interests are protected.

Through that series of mechanisms and series of engagements, CFIA, I have to say, does an excellent job of engaging with trade partners on allegations like you've observed, for example, in dockage in canola or foreign substances in canola above a certain level, or problems with durum wheat in Italy and so on.

So CFIA and the Global Affairs people work very closely with provinces and with our producers and processors to prosecute an agenda of re-opening markets when we do confront those challenges. I think the observation, though, is one that maybe we, as officials, need to understand in a more sophisticated way: If trade is politicized, how do we work with our producers and processors to insulate them as much as possible from those challenges?

One issue is, “Keep the doors open”; the other is, “Open the doors when they close.” But we do have to think of how do we help our producers—for example, diversify markets to make sure that there are outlets when one door closes and another opens. Ministers Fedeli and Hardeman have been very active in doing exactly that, to make sure that our producers and processors have the greatest possible access to new and emerging markets, just to make sure that we have a diversity of opportunity.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Just at the one-minute-and-38-second mark.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Do you have a question?

Mr. Deepak Anand: No, just a comment. I just want to make a comment: I think when MPP Barrett was talking—I thought it was more of a comment than a question, or maybe a complaint more than a question—you put a perspective, a very different and good perspective.

So you're saying that how we behave can reflect in the relationship with other countries, and if that relationship deteriorates, that can have an effect on our producers and industries as well. Is that what you're trying to say?

I think, if that is the case, what I want to hear is what we can do to make sure that we help these producers, or what we can do to help you guys, in building those relationships.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Well, that's a very big question. I think what the government is doing in terms of building relationships is reaching out—the Premier and ministers reaching out fairly systematically to other countries to establish—

Mr. Deepak Anand: We as members, more than the ministries and ministers. We as members.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Yes. With respect, I'm reluctant to task members to undertake any new initiatives, but I can certainly relay to my political masters the interest in becoming more active in that regard.

Mr. Deepak Anand: I appreciate it. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): I will move us along from there. You'll have 16 minutes to start off the last round.

Mr. John Vanthof: Perfect. Thank you, Chair.

We left off on glyphosate. One of the things I think—and I have used Roundup many times in my agriculture career, but the one thing that bothers me a bit about glyphosate is when it's used as a desiccant. Pre-harvest Roundup, I think, at some point, is going to be a problem, because we used to swath all our grain and now we spray it all, and on certain crops you shouldn't spray.

When you spray Roundup on oats as a desiccant, and then you combine it, there very well could be Roundup residue on those oats. It's different than when you're spraying a GMO crop, when the corn is growing, and you spray it on the ground. Then the crop is going to grow for another month, two months, three months. But when you use it as a desiccant, it's there. I used it as a desiccant on barley which I fed to the cows. You also cannot use Roundup as a desiccant on seed grain, because it kills the germ.

So at some point, I think we're going to have to have a serious look about the use of Roundup as a pre-harvest desiccant and anything that enters directly into the food chain.

On a happier note—or not a happier note—on your point regarding education at home: I've got a great example of this. My wife likes fondues, and we do like 20 of these where we invite people. At every one, you have to educate people that you can't use the fork that you poke the raw meat with—you can't put that fork in your mouth. Hardly anyone knows this. It shocks me every time.

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We all take food safety for granted, and there's a big education part. I know it's kind of a personal story, but it shocks me every time. Regardless of walk of life, I have to tell farmers, "Look, you can't do that." I have to tell politicians and I have to tell, sometimes, health professionals, "Look, you can't do that." It's something that we spend a lot of time talking about, as we should—commercial facilities—but we actually need to educate people personally.

One recommendation is regarding when you get a public health inspection on a food premises. Are we at some point going to have, basically, a website that you can go to to see—I'm a bit divided on this—the last inspection, let's say, of a restaurant, or the last inspection of an abattoir? I believe that if there's an inspection, there should be a list of, "Here are the things you have to fix." And if they're fixed, especially with an abattoir, it should be inspection, period, that you have to fix. When I go to restaurants in Toronto, lots of times there's a thing on the door, but that's not universal. My wife works at a restaurant. There's no thing on the door. It's regularly

inspected. Is there going to be something universal at some point, where you can just either open a computer, or it's going to be on the door?

Dr. David Williams: You're correct. If we look at that recommendation there, we have allowed the different health units to do different processes for public notification. You've got two health units here today that do things somewhat similarly, but they have variety there.

What's the best way to reach the consuming public? One may be the sign on the door, the so-called colour-code signs that say it's all clear. Your point is saying: Can they look at the history and see if an institution has had a number of infractions or whatever in the last while? Some feel that should be available on a web page. We have a much different consuming public now that likes to use personal devices. They like to be able to look it up as they're thinking of their evening out. Can they go to web pages and get up to date? What should be put in there for their information and their advice on that, to inform them of the safety and quality of that institution? That's being looked at as well, with social media and different things being used in that way.

Should we put something that's standardized across the whole province, so that what you would do up in Temiskaming Shores or in Geraldton is the same as you would do down on Queen and wherever? And then you also have aspects related to language and interpretation with our multicultural society. What's available? Is it in French or not in French in some areas? So you want to make sure that if you're going to do something that it's consistent, it's accessible and it's kept up to date.

We have been looking at it for a while now. We'll continue to look at it to say, "Should we have a standardized system across?" Because in the past, what you do in areas was very much what you do in front of the storefront, but if you have electronic systems, it could be something that—the chances of someone in Toronto saying, "I want to see what this restaurant is at Temiskaming Shores. What's it like?" may be unlikely, but it could be, if they're going out for a holiday or a vacation. So is that something that's just for the jurisdiction around, or is it for the wider-consuming public, in their high mobility and travelling?

It's an area that I think we have to look at to see how we could do it consistently. But if you're going to do it, you have to keep it up to date, keep changing it and keep informing. It does take an investment of time to do so, but that's part of educating the public. If the public have trust in that and can see that the system is there and accurate, that is what they're looking for as far as being kept informed of the food safety aspects of the institutions they want to partake in.

Mr. John Vanthof: Am I okay for—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Go for it.

Mr. John Vanthof: The Auditor General, in her investigations, found that there are significant differences in the inspection rates of special events in different areas. I know that from my riding. Truth be told, we're not always happy when the public health unit shows up. But there are differences.

I understand that earlier we talked about how it's important to have autonomy, because there are probably different risks, too, but is there a move towards having a more uniform inspection rate of special events?

Ms. Melanie Fraser: I think this goes to a theme that you're hearing across these recommendations from the auditor: that the quality and the reliability of a system, and public confidence in the system—a lot of that comes from a consistent set of expectations and a consistent approach.

While you want flexibility to, as we talked about earlier, respond to unique populations and unique circumstances, it's also important to have some consistent protocols, data capture, evaluation and compliance that can provide rigour across the system at a provincial level.

David can speak to some of the work that's under way to work on the specific recommendation, but I think as we look at the system as a whole and as we modernize public health—this was my earlier point that there are things that I think are okay to happen locally and be influenced locally, and for the autonomy of that community to be reflected in the work of public health, recognizing that the public health issues oftentimes are very connected to a community. But there are also a number of areas where a provincial approach and bringing best practices and evidence to bear and using consistent protocols and procedures really will produce a higher-quality system and higher-quality outcomes for the people of Ontario.

Specific to this recommendation, I don't know, Dr. Williams, if you want to speak to some of the work on that.

Dr. David Williams: In the past there were a few and now there are many special events, and there are many different types of special events. Part of why some are inspected and some are not—the inspector, being aware of it when the application comes in, looks at, “Okay, what are they going to do?” If you're going to have a run for whatever and they're going to serve packaged granola bars and soda or whatever that's bottled, you don't need to inspect it because those are already prepackaged and cared for. If you find out they're going to do actual food preparation and they're going to be selling, is it a retailer that you're used to? Are you going to inspect that—yes or no? Some people are going to bring stuff from home and start selling it, or that kind of stuff. So each one—they're not all equal, and you have to do that risk assessment on a case-by-case basis.

Again, you don't want to be overbearing on one that really has no risk at all. It looks like you're just trying to be difficult. You want the information to be forthcoming from the organizer in a timely fashion so that you can rule in or out if you need an inspection. Then if you do, what kind of inspection do you need? What are the primary precautions you have to put in place there?

I would say that not all special events are created equal. They're all a bit of a variety, but all of them have to be—you have to be informed, as a public health unit, that someone is doing one. Some don't go to the bother of informing, but they're supposed to, through their municipal bylaws, if they're going to undertake one. Then they have to supply certain requirements and information in a

timely fashion, rather than find out an hour and a half before that there's a special event occurring.

There are all those things that can be improved upon, but that's asking the individuals with the right information, at the right time, in the right way. It's not an impediment to offering a special event. We don't want to discourage it. At the same time, it's that education of those providers to say, “You just need to put this in place.” Because you wouldn't want this to happen at your special event, that a good percentage of the people were sick afterwards, because your reputation from then is going to be very difficult to come back from again. You don't want that, the public don't want that, and we don't want that.

Mr. John Vanthof: And I would just like to give kudos out to the health unit in West Nipissing, because when they realized that we were serving smoked meat at the IPM, they were on us like—and everything was very safe.

I started on dairy; I'm going to end on dairy. When I started dairy farming, no one was even thinking about milking water buffalo, milking sheep—and eggs are the same thing: Because our cultures are changing, the demands are changing. Could you expand on what you're going to do? Regardless of what animal it comes from, milk is milk and should be treated the same way.

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Ms. Kelly McAslan: Sure. One of the Auditor General's recommendations in this space was for OMAFRA to take a look at considering oversight of our inspection, to broaden beyond—right now, we have oversight for cow and goat dairy—and to consider water buffalo and sheep, as you said, as things evolve over time. Having said that, those are still both very small sectors, and right now, our Ministry of Health and public health counterparts do oversee water buffalo and sheep dairy.

We work very closely in tandem, in terms of making sure that we're consistent in our education and making sure that we're providing that training. We even attend with public health inspectors and do joint inspections with them, where possible.

We have said that we will take a look and do consultations with industry to see what the right oversight model would look like. So that's something that we can focus on over the coming months.

Mr. John Vanthof: How much time do we have?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Three minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Do you have anything?

Mr. Joel Harden: I guess, in much the same way as my colleague just raised, I have seen non-chicken eggs for sale in many of our open markets. I was just wondering as to the rationale of why they haven't been, as the auditor suggests in her report, regulated in the same way that the traditional egg market is.

Mr. John Vanthof: I think you've already answered that question. If I could, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you very much for being here and for answering the questions very directly. We continue to have big faith in the food system, and you've reinforced that. We will

continue to work together to make sure that Ontarians stay safe. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): So you're done?

Mr. John Vanthof: We're done.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Okay. Thank you very much.

We'll move to the opposition: Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Thank you, Chair, and just a quick question—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): The government. Sorry. Pardon me.

Mr. Toby Barrett: There are a few other questions coming up, I think.

Many of us are following with interest any potential modernization of Ontario's public health services and system. We heard in the introduction of OMAFRA that there are 150 staff inspectors for 4,000 operations. There are 3,400 dairy farms. It seems to be more of a self-regulation model. What's the comparable with public health? How many inspectors, how many restaurants? Is it apples and oranges or just—

Dr. David Williams: Do I have the numbers off the top of my head?

Mr. Toby Barrett: Yes.

Dr. David Williams: I'm asking because you have two from the smaller ones where the public health inspectors may have only about four or five inspectors, to something like Toronto, where you have—I don't know what the total number is. I have to ask Toronto. How many?

Interjection: It's 140.

Dr. David Williams: It's 140. It varies in size, so you can see that across the province. One of the benefits we have with our 34 is that when you do the basic math, we have a fairly good workforce in that regard.

Nevertheless, as we've talked about, there's an expanding variety of food venues that is increasing fairly rapidly, and it comes and goes. The food industry is not a stagnant type thing; it's rapidly changing. Areas that we talked about, with different forms of milk etc., continue to put challenges to the public health inspectors, who have more to do than just food inspection. They have other areas to inspect as well.

The inspectors have that responsibility with regular inspection of food premises, and there's high risk and medium risk and low risk, according to our protocols. That has certain demands on their time to do that and to document that material. Then there are the outbreaks that we have quite frequently to fall upon—not always wide outbreaks, because we try to get them as early as we can, if we see some clustering.

A fair amount of their time in the health unit—staff time—is spent working in conjunction with OMAFRA as well as with CFIA and Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada dealing with presumed, possible or probable food outbreaks and trying to track those down. It takes a lot of work, a lot of laboratory testing, a lot of going out and getting samples and getting re-samples. The samples have to be collected correctly. If they're not done correctly, they're going to be thrown out and you're going

to have to go back and get them again. So it is time-consuming in that way. So that workforce is a very critical part of the overall aspect.

The coordination of that, the investments we make in IT systems to document those on that—you have to keep a record and be accountable and auditable on those aspects there, because they are provincial offence officers. They can render fines. They can make orders in that regard. It's not just looking and seeing that you are carrying out potentially litigious activities; inspectors have to spend time in courts and do that kind of work as well, so there is a variety of different aspects of our professional public health inspection.

Mr. Toby Barrett: We see this DFO model. It looks like self-regulation. We've seen a tremendous takeover, really, by very large food restaurant chains that put out the small restaurants. Do they play much of a role as far as self-regulation? Those franchises probably have pretty tough standards, because one restaurant can affect the rest of North America as far as a particular chain.

Dr. David Williams: There's no doubt. We classify high, medium and low risk. It depends on different things and aspects. Some serve a very large part of the populace and a wide range and variety of people, including some who are fairly susceptible with their health conditions, so it has to be very carefully handled.

We get a lot of actions and complaints against some of the larger chains, but some of the larger ones are very fastidious on their pre-preparation, their training of their staff, because they can't afford to have a complaint. So while we do follow up on those and we do check them out, it doesn't happen too often. There may be a food handler, a trainee, who has an infectious disease while they're on the job that was unknown to the owner, and we have to follow up on those as part of the preparation, but for the large part, the large chains, as part of their protocols—because when one has a problem, everybody wears the brand—are very careful on how they maintain that.

We find that not often is there a problem there, although the public, because of the frequency they go there and how they might want to, do render complaints. We still have to follow up on those and we try to ensure that it's okay. But, no, they're not clear of inspections either. We have a regular process to undertake those.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Mr. Crawford?

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I just wanted to ask a little bit about something we haven't talked about today: biosecurity. There has been lots of discussion publicly in the province—in the Legislature, even—about this, and I'm wondering if you could fill us in on how important these biosecurity protocols are for the safety of consumers here in Ontario.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: I'm going to call upon Rodger Dunlop on my team to answer that question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Mr. Dunlop, if you just want to introduce yourself for the record, for Hansard.

Mr. Rodger Dunlop: Sure, thank you. My name is Rodger Dunlop and I am the general manager for Ontario's meat inspection program.

Biosecurity is a concern in Ontario. We want to ensure, from the producer to the transporter to the packer, that biosecurity is managed properly. We want to ensure that diseases aren't transmitted from the farm to the trucker to the packing plant. Farms today are managing biosecurity responsibly and work closely with their associations to ensure that the biosecurity measures are monitored.

From a meat-packing plant perspective, plants are following very closely the biosecurity aspects, ensuring proper sanitation, cleaning and disinfection, proper training of staff and monitoring for any issues. Our inspection staff work very closely with them.

Recently we experienced PED in the pork industry. We worked very closely with the industry to help manage this issue. From the farm to the trucking businesses to the packer, again, we all took steps to try to manage these issues very carefully and responsibly, even with our inspection staff and the serious steps that they take in terms of biosecurity and making sure that their equipment is clean from the point in time where they depart their vehicles, to entering the plants, to entering other plants. I know that the same is happening in the trucking industry, to make sure that trucks are properly cleaned and sanitized, trying to manage risks from farm to farm.

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Mr. Stephen Crawford: Has this changed over the last decade or two? Has it become more of an issue, or has it always been there and we're maybe becoming more aware of it?

Mr. Rodger Dunlop: I think it's fair to say that we continue to build on our biosecurity practices more and more and we are understanding it more and more. I think the farming industry is a good example, in their leadership in biosecurity.

Right from the farm, again, the trucking industry is taking it far more seriously and is far more aware of the concerns around biosecurity. We're taking steps in the food processing industry as well, to ensure that biosecurity measures are followed properly.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: This may not be a question for you, but I'm just wondering: With the new animal protection service that we have in Ontario that was created earlier and is probably being created as we speak—how are they working, or how do you see them working, with the Ministry of Agriculture?

Mr. Greg Meredith: It's not directly a biosecurity issue, but we're very proud of that legislation. It really positions us as a leader in animal welfare and animal safety. It's a very important part of, again, the public confidence that farmers are good stewards of animal welfare.

On the issues of biosecurity and your question about if it's growing, I have to say, whether the incidents are growing or not, certainly our awareness of the implications is growing. I think we're more effective at understanding what those risks are and mitigating them.

I could just take this opportunity to make the committee aware of a very significant biosecurity hazard that countries across the world are collaborating on to control right now. It's African swine fever. There are literally millions of cases across many, many countries right now. North America continues to be, as they call it, ASF-free, but the implications of introducing that disease onto a farm are astonishingly high. The implication of a find in Canada could be as drastic as closing borders to all of our hog exports, and in Ontario, those are very significant. It could have implications for the movement of animals from farms to slaughter. It would therefore have implications for animal welfare. What do you do with these animals? How do you continue to feed them? The production system in the hog business is very rapid, so you quickly run into animal welfare problems.

This is a very, very significant biosecurity hazard that governments are absolutely seized with because of the animal welfare implications—it's 100% fatal—and because of the economic implications, which are very dramatic. I can't say if that's a trend, but that's a very significant disease. It would make PED look relatively minor, by comparison.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Mr. Babikian.

Mr. Aris Babikian: I want to ask you a question about glyphosate—I hope I pronounced it correctly. I see that it is banned in certain countries and in some other countries is in use. Can you brief us or tell us where we are on this issue, if there is any additional research done to come to a final conclusion if it should be used or banned etc., and what are the protocols being used on this issue?

Mr. Greg Meredith: Further to my earlier comments on this crop input, it is approved for use in most countries in the world that are using advanced production systems. Some have chosen to ban it as a risk. I would say that the evidence to do that is slim. There was a major study very recently coming out of the US reaffirming the safety of glyphosate from a human health point of view. Equally, as I think I mentioned earlier, the PMRA, Pest Management Regulatory Agency, at the federal level, which is the pre-eminent science source of safety for pest management and control inputs, has just re-examined glyphosate and affirmed it for use. So it continues to be a matter of public concern, because you do hear about high-profile cases—jury cases in the United States, typically. Very frequently, if not all the time, those cases are about the application of glyphosate, and not about the science of human health. So it continues to be an approved product. There is continued evidence of its safe use.

We did agree with the Auditor General, however, that an adventitious presence issue could become a consumer confidence problem. It could become a problem for farmers if people perceive that as a risk. So we did agree that we should do some sampling. We're going to start in May of this year. We'll continue for another year after that. We'll engage our partners systematically in our findings.

I can tell you that the last review of glyphosate at the federal level did result in some changes in how it's used—not where it's used and on what crops, and it did not label it a human health issue for food, but just making sure that the label was up to date and that farmers are instructed on how to safely use glyphosate. I can imagine that there would be very much a great deal of interest in our findings about adventitious presence at the federal level.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): One minute.

Mr. Michael Parsa: I have one minute, so I just want to ask you on just the support by our government when it comes to smaller abattoirs, please. Can you just tell us a little bit about that, with the regulations etc.? I just want to know some of the ways that our government might be supportive.

Mr. Greg Meredith: I'm going to turn to Kelly in a moment, but let me preface it by saying that it's the bigger plants that are generally those that are inspected by CFIA, because CFIA inspects every plant that ships product to other provinces or to the world.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Because they're federally regulated—

Mr. Greg Meredith: Exactly; they're federally regulated. CFIA-inspected plants tend to be the big ones.

So that means that our service to our abattoirs, slaughterhouses and processors is really about small to medium-sized enterprises. Very often, the abattoir might be the only one in the vicinity that offers a slaughter service to farmers. Our level of engagement with our clientele group there is much higher, I guess I would say, than a federally inspected process, because we are working with them. As was mentioned earlier, part of our effort is to work with processors to make sure that they understand the processes required to achieve a safety outcome, and make sure they understand what humane practices really mean. So we're very hands-on with those abattoirs, and I would say that that's key—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Pardon me, Deputy Minister. I'm going to have to hold you there. We are officially out of time. At this point, I would like to thank you and your teams for being here, as well as our Auditor General and her team for being here. We do certainly appreciate the information that you gave us today, and appreciate the work that you do on behalf of the province, so thank you very much.

With that, members, we will moved to closed session, and the public will have to leave the room. Thank you, and I'm banging the gavel.

The committee continued in closed session at 1438.

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