House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

AGRI • NUMBER 043 • 2nd SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Monday, August 18, 2008

Chair

Mr. James Bezan

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

Monday, August 18, 2008

● (1750)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

We're continuing in meeting 43 with our briefing session with CFIA, to talk about the report we were talking about in the previous meeting.

We welcome to the table—no strangers here—Dr. Brian Evans, executive vice-president; Mr. Gordon R. White, vice-president, finance, administration and information technology; and Paul Mayers, acting vice-president, programs.

Dr. Evans, if you would bring forward your opening comments I'd appreciate that very much.

Dr. Brian Evans (Executive Vice-President, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In recognition of the important work of the committee, we will certainly be brief in our opening comments in order to provide all members the opportunity to answer those questions that are pertinent to you.

As indicated by the chair, my name is Dr. Brian Evans. I am the executive vice-president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. I am very pleased to be present with very competent colleagues here at the hearings.

As you know, there have been recent reports that the CFIA plans to cut back on food inspections. I can well understand why these rumours would concern members of the committee. There is, however, no basis in fact to these reports.

[*Translation*]

I would like to clear up misconceptions about budget reallocation, and lay to rest any fears about the integrity of our food safety system.

We have a food safety system that is internationally recognized as one of the best in the world, and misinformation can threaten this hard-earned reputation.

[*English*]

We very much value and respect the trust that Canadians and consumers in other countries have in our food safety efforts. However, we also recognize that this is a trust that must be earned each and every day.

[*Translation*]

It is important to deal with the facts about our inspection system and I hope to clarify those facts today. I also welcome the opportunity to answer your questions about this system.

[*English*]

Mr. Chairman, the health and safety of Canadians has been, is, and always will remain the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's highest priority.

Last year, as part of the government's new expenditure management system, the CFIA was one of 17 departments and agencies that undertook a comprehensive review of its program and services. The objective was to put forward a series of reallocation proposals that would see resources reinvested more effectively to support government priorities.

For the CFIA, as outlined in the 2008 budget, the savings identified in the review were redirected to Canada's food and consumer safety action plan to enhance and protect the health and safety of Canadians. There were no reductions in funding for the CFIA as a result of this exercise, nor were there job losses. In fact, one of the goals of our strategic review was to ensure that the CFIA was allocating resources to areas of highest risk.

In response to a global food supply and the changing associated risks, the CFIA is modernizing the way it performs its core role so that it can continue to effectively manage risk to human health and the safety of Canadians, as well as risk to animal health and plant protection. Canadians expect and deserve the highest standard of protection from preventable risk to food safety. The CFIA is committed to the continuous assessment and improvement of our inspection approaches to reflect best practices.

In terms of efficiency, one of our strategic review initiatives being implemented is to consolidate our import document assessment and release activities. Such a single-window approach will provide increased bilingual service from the existing 20 hours, to 24 hours, seven days a week. It will also increase consistency in the review of import documentation and verification of import admissibility and allow us to better coordinate with our partners, such as the Canadian Border Services Agency.

Other savings were identified due to advancements in science and technology. For example, the CFIA has developed an environmentally friendly and more cost-effective method to dispose of dead birds that result from depopulation activities in the control of diseases such as avian influenza. This has allowed us to reallocate money originally intended for the purchase of specialized disposal equipment, which our experience and capacity now informs us we no longer need.

[*Translation*]

In no way does this reallocation diminish our avian influenza preparedness, which remains one of our main top priorities. In fact, we have recently begun implementing, in collaboration with producer and industry groups, an enhanced surveillance program.

[*English*]

Mr. Chairman, in budget 2008, the food and consumer safety action plan was earmarked to receive, through this process, $113 million over two years. The CFIA will receive some $62 million of this amount to enhance our system by concentrating on preventing problems, in the first place, in country of origin and pre-border, targeting the products that present the highest risks and providing rapid response to problems when they do occur.

On the subject of industry responsibility in our food safety system, as you know, food safety has always been a shared responsibility. Industry is responsible for ensuring that the food products they produce for the Canadian marketplace are safe. The CFIA's role is to verify that industy is fulfilling its responsibility.

Over the past decade and more, much industry and government effort has gone into developing and investing in science-based preventative systems to enhance food safety. For over 15 years, many parts of the Canadian food industry have already put these preventative systems in place to better detect, prevent, and eliminate problems before they occur. The most familiar of these are the hazard analysis and critical control point, or HACCP, systems. The industry plans must always meet CFIA specifications, and CFIA will always inspect, monitor and verify compliance so that food safety standards are met.

The term “self-policing” has sometimes been given a negative sense to describe this approach. The reality is that industry is responsible for investing in and putting in place science-based food safety systems in line with internationally recognized approaches to producing safer food. And of course there must always be strong government oversight, evaluation, verification, and effective enforcement and compliance action.

[*Translation*]

Modernization of our inspection systems is a responsive, and responsible, undertaking. The approach is not new. You may have read in the past CFIA reports on plans and priorities about our work on making inspection methods more effective.

● (1755)

[*English*]

Strong inspection presence is key to our success. Over the past two years, the number of CFIA inspectors has increased from 2,820 to 3,020. In previous testaments before this committee in my role as chief veterinary officer, I have indicated how we have grown the veterinary complement of the CFIA from its initial 473, in 1997, to its current 734. It will continue to increase under the food and consumer safety action plan.

Mr. Chairman, as committee members are aware, our BSE controls are a vital part of the CFIA's mandate and activities. These controls play an important role in protecting human and animal health and keeping markets open for Canadian producers. Since the first case of domestic BSE, or mad cow disease, was detected in 2003, more than 230,000 cows have been tested through the national surveillance program. Not only has this program demonstrated the low level of BSE in Canada, it has also helped restore and expand market access. The surveillance program also exceeds the stringent requirements of the World Organisation for Animal Health, or OIE, which now recognizes Canada as a controlled risk BSE country.

Canada's BSE surveillance program remains an important component in our strategy to manage BSE. Contrary to what you may have heard, we will maintain testing and surveillance activities to protect human and animal health from the threat of BSE and to continue to meet our international trade obligations.

[*Translation*]

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, we are doing more, not less, to protect the health and safety of Canadians. We are also continually modernizing and improving our inspection systems to meet the challenges of a changing environment, whether it is emerging food safety risks or changes to technology or the marketplace.

[*English*]

When adjustments are made to inspection strategies or approaches, the CFIA has always considered best available science and best practices, and we have consulted with stakeholders and partners before they are implemented. That will continue. There will be no changes without appropriate consultation and foundation.

Canada's food safety system is recognized as one of the best in the world. Our goal is to keep it that way and, indeed, make it even better.

We collectively are prepared to answer all questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Evans.

We'll go to seven-minute rounds.

Mr. Easter, you'll kick us off.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you, gentlemen.

There is no doubt that CFIA has moved substantially ahead since 1997, and we're pretty proud about that. Brian, as chief veterinarian, you're recognized around the world, and I think you're one of the best around the world. I certainly congratulate you on that.

Our concern is not with you, and it's not with the agency. Our concern is with the political bosses and the Prime Minister's Office. It's with a Prime Minister who has made no secret about his desire to basically devolve the federal government to being nothing less than Defence and Foreign Affairs. That's where our concerns arise.

I need to ask you these questions. In terms of your presentation, were you given any direction? I mean, earlier Brian kind of indicated what you might say. Were you given any direction by either the minister or the deputy on what you should say to this committee?

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I didn't indicate that the witnesses would be saying one thing or another. I think it's important to recognize that the facts I got were absolutely fine. If Mr. Easter had taken the time to read budget 2008—

The Chair: That's debate. But as I've done in the past when we've had public servants appearing before committee, I'm going to point committee members to Marleau and Montpetit, chapter 20, page 863:

> The obligation of a witness to answer all questions put by the committee must be balanced against the role that public servants play in providing confidential advice to their Ministers. The role of the public servant has traditionally been viewed in relation to the implementation and administration of government policy, rather than the determination of what that policy should be. Consequently, public servants have been excused from commenting on the policy decisions made by the government. In addition, committees will ordinarily accept the reasons that a public servant gives for declining to answer a specific question or series of questions which involve the giving of a legal opinion, or which may be perceived as a conflict with the witness' responsibility to the Minister, or which is outside of their own area of responsibility or which might affect business transactions.

The witnesses are not obligated to answer things that relate to policy or their relationship with the minister or the government. We're talking about the report in front of us and the strategic review that CFIA did.

● (1800)

Hon. Wayne Easter: That's fine. I accept that, Mr. Chair.

The problem we have here, gentlemen, is this. You mention the savings identified in the 2008 budget. So really, in terms of the documentation that the chair has mentioned, the difficult position you find yourself in is that if there is a secret document, which has been stated in the media there is, that allegedly talks about cuts of 5%, cutting $25 million, transferring inspection to industry, eliminating the approval system for labelling, among other things, proposed for the future and in the discussion stages, then at this stage —and we do know this government is secretive—you really couldn't talk about it, could you?

Is that fair to say, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Mr. Evans.

Dr. Brian Evans: As has been indicated, obviously, in terms of the strategic review process, honourable member, CFIA undertook to prepare a memorandum to cabinet that outlined where we felt there were opportunities for us to make investments that would be part of a transformative process to modernize inspection activities. We were pleased that the submission, as it was reviewed, determined that any allocations from within adjustments to our programming would in fact be reinvested in CFIA and not allocated to other government priorities. We were pleased that the formative process that we went through identified that investment in food safety was an appropriate priority for the government to invest in.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes. I'm not saying that as a criticism of you folks. That's the reality. If the Minister of Finance, taking his direction from the PMO, decides there's going to be a 10% cut in CFIA, you folks, in your job, have no choice but to exercise it. That's the dilemma we're in here without having access to the secret document.

We passed a motion earlier that we hoped to obtain that secret document. The dilemma for us and the opposition is that we don't have the document—although we've passed a motion that we want it —and you can't answer the questions because of the very point that the chair outlined. So we're in a bit of a box here. It makes my argument that we really need that secret document and we really need to know where the government is going, if they could can their secrecy and discuss things with the public. It's well known, and everybody knows in this country, the Prime Minister's resolve to basically get rid of the federal government except in a couple of areas.

I have just one other question, and I don't know whether you can answer this one either, but there seems to be a fair bit of discussion on the proposal to reduce or limit the approval system for labelling. We at this committee have pushed for truth in labelling, that "Product of Canada" be what it actually says, that imported product clearly define where the product comes from, etc. But it's alleged, around this secret document—and one scientist was fired, as you know—that there's to be an elimination of the approval system that the CFIA undertakes for labelling.

Can you say anything on that?

Dr. Brian Evans: Certainly. I'd just make a point, honourable member, regarding that "Product of Canada" labelling, which was the focus of a significant report from this committee, one that we very much valued and have taken into account, and we have moved forward on the "Product of Canada" initiatives. That initiative in itself is not related to what was announced in the budget, which dealt with pre-market label review for certain commodities in areas where we were currently providing a pre-market assessment and inhibiting the ability of some sectors to get innovative product into the marketplace.

Perhaps, if you would allow, I'd ask Paul Mayers to speak to that issue, because that is one of the initiatives we are currently implementing.

● (1805)

Mr. Paul Mayers (Acting Vice-President, Programs, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

On the pre-market label review, I stress that the change we're pursuing from a modernization perspective is only in relation to the pre-market label review. This would not change the required detail, the level of information available to consumers, or the inspection and verification of labels in the marketplace. But we do propose to reduce the regulatory burden on industry by removing the mandatory requirement for pre-market label review of meat and processed fruits and vegetables. The CFIA would continue to provide information and expert advice related to label design to assist the industry to ensure that they can indeed comply with the requirements related to labelling. The labels would continue to provide Canadians with the information they need to make informed choices about the foods they purchase.

So the only adjustment we would make is to remove the current regulatory burden on the industry to have a mandatory review in advance of its products going into the marketplace.

The Chair: Your time has expired, Mr. Easter.

Monsieur Bellavance, pour sept minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Thank you very much.

Mr. Evans, you didn't beat about the bush in your address when you said that incorrect information was reported in the media. Here I'm talking about the story on Mr. Pomerleau that was made public in the media over the summer. You say that falsehoods were conveyed by the media.

We're going to examine this together. As a former journalist, I always get touchy in situations where blame is laid on the media. In this case, they merely reported the facts. They had definitely obtained information on the matter.

What was this inaccurate information that was reported? We're going to proceed point by point. Is it true or false that part of the plan to change the inspection system involves conferring on the industry responsibilities that currently fall to the agency? Is that a falsehood?

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Evans: No, that is not a true statement. The reality of meat inspection modernization, as has been the case with all of our modernization initiatives since the creation of the agency, has been to work to recognize quality assurance and HACCP-based systems, making those mandatory for industry sectors, and then ensuring that our resources are dedicated to verifying that industry is in fact achieving the food safety outcome and standard for which they are being held accountable.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: And yet you told me here on this subject, in your testimony on May 15, that your program had to be adjusted so that it would be less prescriptive and so there would be less oversight. You added: "...recognizing that industry has their quality management-based systems and their production for bringing quality food to the marketplace..."

So I imagine you're opening the door to those changes. That was your explanation on what the government had asked you at that time. I see a contradiction here with the answer you've just given me. The idea is to delegate responsibilities to the industry. That's what you told us last May.

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Evans: No, there is no divesting of responsibility on the part of CFIA. In fact, part of our effort at CFIA has been in recognition of the changing risk environment in which food is produced, intensive agricultural production systems, globalization of food, increased utilization of foreign ingredients in Canadian food, and the reality of new and emerging pathogens in the food system associated with changes in the types of food consumers are looking for. These have required us to continually adapt our inspection systems, our residue monitoring programs, and our oversight activities.

Canada also participates with many other countries through the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the international standard-setting body for food safety. As they update standards around inspection approaches and verification, we in Canada want to be seen as being at the leading edge of international credibility in adopting those methods as well.

So there's no divergence. In fact, modernization, if you will, or inspection integrity improvement is a continuous process that we undertake at CFIA by inviting other countries to come to audit our inspection system. Because we are a major exporter, we are probably one of the most audited countries in the world. We take very seriously the recommendations of foreign audits of our system. In our audits of other countries' systems, we very much aspire to see if there is a better practice that will give us those same outcomes.

So there's no divergence. Modernization of inspection is necessary in a changing risk environment.

● (1810)

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Evans, I'm going to give you other statements that were reported by the media, and you'll then comment. We probably won't have the time to address them one by one at this rate.

Is it true that the government asked you to recover 5% of your operating budgets? That was reported in the media, and it leads me to say this: the government made some election-style announcements in cutting the GST, but it looks like it's now up to each department to recover money. I get the impression these people have a budget problem. In short, is it true that you were asked to recover 5% of your operating budgets?

Is it true that you're going to have to cut assistance to agricultural producers for BSE inspections? We're talking about cuts of $24 million over the next three years.

According to the plan that Mr. Pomerleau revealed to his union, the inspectors will now have a general oversight mandate, whereas the industry will verify food safety. Is that true? I think you partly answered that earlier, but I'd like to know whether you deny that all this change in the system was approved by your services last November. Is it true that, for unknown reasons, communication problems, that wasn't known? Did your services already know of this plan in November? Was it then shelved and kept there until Mr. Pomerleau sent it to his union?

Let's start with the 5% cuts?

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Evans: As indicated, CFIA was one of 17 departments and agencies that were part of the first of a four-year cycle, a review of all departments and agencies in government under the government's expenditure management system, or EMS, which was adopted by Treasury Board.

Within the parameters of that particular program, CFIA, along with all others who have to go through that process on the four-year cycle, are required to identify up to 5% of their A-base budget in terms of areas where programs are either underperforming or could be redesigned to be more effective, to identify how those savings could possibly be seen, and then it is the decision of government as to whether or not that money would be reallocated to other government priorities.

As I indicated in my comments, in the CFIA approach the government recognized that our proposals to move into enhancing food safety was an agreed priority, so the CFIA did not lose 5%. We lost nothing in that process.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: I'm going to ask you to answer yes or no.

With regard to the cuts in aid to producers with regard to BSE, is that a falsehood that was reported by the media? Was it a matter of being able to save $24 million over three years by cutting aid to producers for inspections for BSE, that is to say mad cow disease. Is that correct?

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Evans: No, that is not accurate. Our proposal is that we maintain BSE surveillance and activities. When we undertook our BSE surveillance program, designed in 2003 on the enhanced program, we identified at that time the need to achieve approximately 30,000 samples per year to achieve our objective of having a very credible system, in line with international standards. You will be well aware from our previous appearances at the committee that in fact we are achieving about double that level of testing over the five years subsequent to the detection of BSE. Our undertaking, through assessing our BSE information that we've gathered and analyzed over the five years since we started our BSE program, has identified to us that we can continue to better target those animals that have the highest possibility of contracting BSE.

In doing that, it would mean we would no longer be testing animals that don't have the potential to find BSE, as is currently the case in some elements of our program.

The Chair: Monsieur Bellavance, your time has expired.

Thank you, Mr. Evans.

Mr. Lauzon.

● (1815)

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here, Dr. Evans and colleagues. We're lucky to have you.

Dr. Evans, for about an hour now—or longer than that, for quite some time now—there's been a lot of misinformation put out by the opposition parties actually bordering on fear-mongering. So I want it to go on record. I want you to tell me and tell all Canadians, because I don't want Canadians to be misinformed here; I don't want Canadians to believe the spin. I think that in your comments you said these rumours would concern members of the committee, but there is no basis in fact for these reports. Is that true? Is that what you said?

Dr. Brian Evans: That's what I said, yes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Great. You also said it's unfortunate when incorrect information is reported in the media, as it causes erroneous perceptions and Canadians needlessly worry that their food supply is unsafe. Was that your comment?

Dr. Brian Evans: That was in our opening comments, yes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Exactly. You say:

> For the CFIA, as outlined in the 2008 Budget, the savings identified in the review were redirected to Canada's Food and Consumer Safety Action Plan to enhance and protect the health and safety of Canadians.
>
> There were no reductions in funding for the CFIA as a result of this exercise. Nor were there job losses.
>
> In fact, one of the goals of our strategic review was to ensure that the CFIA was allocating resources to areas of highest risk.
>
> Mr. Chairman, in Budget 2008, the Food and Consumer Safety Action Plan was earmarked to receive $113 million over two years. The CFIA will receive some $62 million of this amount, to enhance our system by concentrating on preventing problems in the first place, targeting the products that present the highest risks and providing rapid response to problems when they occur.

I could go on, but I want to tell you why this happened, Dr. Evans, and I want to tell Canadians, because this started way back, I think, in January.

Let me read you another quote:

> I'm going to be honest with you. This election, when it comes, I believe it will be the most brutal, it will be the most negative, and it will be the most aggressive election campaign that this country has ever seen.

It also says this:

> Canadians should brace themselves for a "brutal, negative, aggressive, Republican/U.S.-style election campaign" that could come as early as this spring, says Malpeque MP Wayne Easter.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'd like to give the rest of my time to my colleague.

The Chair: Mr. Storseth, you have five and a half minutes.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Let's rehash a little bit what's actually happened in today's committee meeting, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Easter and his gang know there's a secret report out there. They don't know what's in the report, and that's why they need somebody to table the report. Then when CFIA comes to deny the allegations that are made, Mr. Easter and his gang suddenly know some of the contents that are in the report. But they still need to see the report and they no longer believe what the witnesses have come forward and said.

If you listen to what Mr. Easter has said, or what Mr. Easter has alleged, there's going to be a decrease in funding. We see on page 2 that Mr. Evans says that there was no decrease in funding.

There has also been allegations that the avian flu preparedness is going to somehow be impacted to the negative. Mr. Evans has said on page 3 that there has not been any impact to the avian flu preparedness in this country.

Then Mr. Easter goes off and talks about decentralization and how this is all some big conspiracy about decentralization. Now, he may be afraid that there isn't going to be a green shaft in this country and there isn't going to be $15 billion sucked away from rural economies to give to, you know, downtown Toronto, but the fact of the matter is that there have been 200 more inspectors put in place in the last two years.

I hope Mr. Easter is taking notes of some of these things.

I do have a question for the witnesses.

Mr. Evans, you talked about your department being asked to identify a potential of 5% reallocation, some things that could be done more effectively or efficiently. I assume you met with these directions and came forward with at least 5% in proposals. Is that correct?

Dr. Brian Evans: That's correct.

Mr. Brian Storseth: These were department proposals put forward by you and your professionals that you felt could in some ways enhance or take away some of the duplicity in the previous department?

Dr. Brian Evans: That's correct.

● (1820)

Mr. Brian Storseth: I think it's important that we state this for Canadians: were all of the proposals that were put forth accepted and implemented?

Dr. Brian Evans: I can only speak to the fact that budget 2008 identified those initiatives that had been approved for implementation.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Exactly, and I think that's the point.

You bring forward proposals. Not all proposals are going to be accepted and not all proposals are going to be implemented. I'm sure that across the 17 departments that you talked about not every proposal that was ever brought up by a bureaucrat was implemented in budget 2008. Would this be a safe assumption, or can you comment on that?

Dr. Brian Evans: Obviously, our role as public servants is to give our best advice and ultimately government will determine whether that advice is advice that they wish to accept.

Mr. Brian Storseth: But it only makes sense. When we start talking about this stuff, we have to break it down and not allow the fear-mongering to come in. It only makes sense that bureaucrats would come from any stream with different proposals, but they're not all going to be put forward.

Mr. Wayne Easter: Are any—

Mr. Brian Storseth: Excuse me, Mr. Chair.

I think it's also very safe to say that in these proposals the Government of Canada has gone forward and decided to increase funding, and you said $62 million to CFIA alone.

Dr. Brian Evans: Over two years.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Over two years. There's not going to be a decrease this year in inspectors. There has actually been an increase in animal science specialists over the last—

Dr. Brian Evans: What I indicated is that in terms of our overall inspection staff we've seen an increase of 200 inspectors, as you've indicated, over the past two years. I've also pointed out on numerous occasions before this committee that our veterinary cadre, which we see as one of several very important scientific disciplines to advance our efforts, has itself grown from 470 to 734 over 10 years.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Mayers, Mr. White and you have come before our committee, and sometimes we haven't been that nice to you guys. I think it's also important to recognize that you have taken into account some of the hard work done on this committee with the food labelling aspects and other things that weren't necessarily included in budget 2008. It's important that we as a committee—and it's our responsibility as members of Parliament—tell the truth and advocate on behalf of the safety of our system and therefore advocate our ability for international trade throughout the world.

These are the things, Mr. Easter, that I really hope you're writing down some notes on over there.

The last question I have for you is in regard to your talking about science-based food safety programs that are internationally recognized and the modernization of our process. Can you tell me some of the countries that are already using this science-based program?

Mr. Paul Mayers: In terms of an approach that recognizes the accountability of industry to produce safe food and verifies that industry delivers on that accountability through their process controls, using approaches such as HACCP, several developed countries around the world apply the same approaches, with mandatory HACCP requirements—in the United States, Europe, Australia, and Japan—and government agencies like our own with responsibility to verify that those process controls are indeed in place and are indeed effective in reducing risk and preventing or responding to any hazards in order to protect the safety of consumers.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Your time has expired.

Mr. Dewar, the floor is yours. You have the last seven-minute round.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you to our guests for appearing before the committee.

I want to start off with a question about, I guess, how we got here. We've established that you did bring proposals forward to government, but you were asked to do so, right?

Dr. Brian Evans: That's correct.

Mr. Paul Dewar: So let's be clear about this. This is direction, and that's the way government works. The government wanted to seek efficiencies—there's sometimes a euphemism for that—in certain departments. The number of 5% was established, and your agency was asked to bring forward efficiencies. Since that time we've learned that there have been changes in the way your agency does business. What we're trying to establish is exactly to what extent.

What we've heard in the public domain—and maybe you could help us here—is that the changes that have been put in place will affect the animal feed mills. Is that correct?

● (1825)

Dr. Brian Evans: Yes. That which has been announced deals with the consolidation of import document review; improving our seed certification programs; removing the mandatory pre-market label review for meat, processed fruit, and vegetable; feed inspection harmonization; and adjustment to our avian influenza preparedness program.

Mr. Paul Dewar: When was that made public?

Dr. Brian Evans: That was made public in budget 2008.

Mr. Paul Dewar: No, not the intention; I mean in terms of the details of those changes. Where would a member of Parliament or a citizen find, not the announcement in the budget, but the details of the operational changes? Is that public knowledge, or are there public documents that I could find to show exactly how the inspection of the feed mills has changed, and particularly the one that you mentioned: eliminating mandatory label registration of meat product and processed meats?

Where would I find the detailed information on how that has changed? What I'm asking is, is it in the public domain?

Mr. Paul Mayers: The approach the agency is taking for each of these initiatives continues to be elaborated as we implement the initiatives.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm sorry to interrupt, but I only have seven minutes.

So what you're telling me is that as a citizen I can't find out how the operational changes are taking place—not the announcement in budget 2008, not the intention to change things, but the exact way in which we're changing direction, particularly the elimination of the way the mandatory label registration takes place and how it's happening and the effects it will have on my family, for instance.

Dr. Brian Evans: In terms of the process, honourable member, the only adjustment that has been made in 2008-09 is the adjustment to the avian influenza program, which was the decision not to go forward and purchase the disposal equipment.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Fair enough.

Dr. Brian Evans: That is the only difference.

Mr. Paul Dewar: So what I'm hearing is that we don't have the details yet of how things are going to change in these other facets. You have a change in approach, but you don't have the details that you can share with me.

Dr. Brian Evans: We don't have all of those finalized at this point, because those adjustments don't kick in until future years in terms of implementation.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Do you have the plan ready?

Dr. Brian Evans: Yes, a regulatory plan has been published that talks about the changes that are necessary as they relate to—

Mr. Paul Dewar: No, no, I'm talking about what actually happens on the ground. In each of these areas that you just mentioned, can I look at a document that says that from now on, in the case of meat products, we are going to change the way in which we actually regulate meat products, and here's who's going to look at them, here are the standard criteria, here are how many times an abattoir is going to be visited, and here's what they have to show us in terms of records? If there are changes that have been proposed and changes that are being made, I want to know what the heck those changes are.

What I'm hearing from you is, well, we announced in the budget that we're going to do it and there's an approach in place, but I want to know the details of how it's going to change for me as a consumer and for the producers. What I'm hearing you say is that it's not there yet.

Dr. Brian Evans: It is not there yet because the implementation of those changes has not been scheduled to take place, and for some not until 2010-11.

So as we said before, we consult. We will be consulting with industry, with provinces, and with consumers about the actual details of the plans prior to their full implementation.

Mr. Paul Dewar: And when is that going to happen?

Dr. Brian Evans: As I said, there's a progression on each of these. Each of them has an individual timeline for when it's scheduled to be implemented in terms of the reallocation of the funding.

Mr. Paul Dewar: The final question I have, Mr. Chair, is that I just know that what's happening here in terms of what the government is doing is not in isolation.

I want to know if you're aware of and took part in the whole Treasury Board panel review of inspections of how labs are used. I'm not sure if the Canadian Food Inspection Agency was part of that, but I understand there was a Treasury Board panel put together—a group of experts, who I think were doing their work from August to December 2007—to look at how government can create "efficiencies and partnerships" with industry in terms of how they monitor and how they do testing in labs. Is that something you were part of?

● (1830)

Dr. Brian Evans: We at CFIA were aware that under the government's science and technology platform, there was a review of what are called non-regulatory laboratories. CFIA is a regulatory agency, so our laboratory system was not considered within the scope of that review.

The Chair: You still have a minute left if you want it.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I guess the last question I have, and can't resist, is on BSE.

I have to say, Mr. Evans, that I know you've said in the past that our system is up to the highest standard. I respectfully disagree. I'd just like to know, for the committee and for the public.... You mentioned that you looked at 60,000 samples per year.

Dr. Brian Evans: That's what we're currently doing.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Could you give evidence—perhaps not right now—to the committee about the sampling in other jurisdictions, be it Japan or Europe, if you have that information? And how many samples do they test per year? I believe, but I could be wrong, that they are more rigorous.

The final point is that I know that in the past you have publicly ruled out the idea of banning animal waste products as feed for cattle, yet isn't it the case that animal waste as feed has been banned in other jurisdictions, such as Europe?

Dr. Brian Evans: Mr. Chair, we would be more than pleased to share the information we have available on testing programs in other jurisdictions as part of our import assessments of other countries.

As we've indicated, our surveillance system in Canada is based on the recommendations of the World Organisation for Animal Health and their surveillance guidelines. Our program is designed accordingly, and we are substantively exceeding the parameters set for us by that organization.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I heard that, but I'm specifically talking about those two jurisdictions.

Dr. Brian Evans: To conclude, Mr. Chair, as we've testified on numerous occasions on BSE testing, we do recognize that other countries have adopted different approaches, for different reasons that are not food safety and public health related.

As has been seen in many countries, testing young animals at slaughter, while it may inflate numbers, has no potential to detect BSE, because (a) those animals are not affected at that young an age, and (b) the test methods are not validated to find it even if the animals could incubate the disease. The approach we have taken has been driven by science.

On the issue of SRM removal, in fact Canada did, in 2006, publish a total removal of all SRM from animal feed. That has been in force since July 2007.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time has expired.

We're going to our five-minute round.

Mr. St. Amand.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, gentlemen.

Dr. Evans, if I may, you'll know what I'm talking about when I refer to the report from November 2007; it's clear to you what I'm talking about. Does that report actually exist? Is there a report from November 2007—the report you just indicated?

Mr. Brian Storseth: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'll refer to the Standing Orders. You referred earlier to page 862.

The Chair: That's Marleau and Montpetit.

If you feel that any of your answers at all jeopardize your relationship with the minister or the government, or put in jeopardy policy versus implementation, you have the choice of defining your answers as you see fit.

Dr. Brian Evans: I would respond, as we've already indicated, that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency did participate in the strategic review process that was undertaken under the government's expenditure management system. I am not in a position to discuss cabinet confidences, which are protected under section 69 of the Access to Information Act. That includes our submissions to cabinet, any cabinet deliberations, and cabinet decisions.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: I'm not asking you, for the moment, to disclose what was in this report. As a result of the review, can you at least agree—and I hope the government doesn't have the temerity to consider you part of the communications risk, or maybe they do—that as a result of the review a report was prepared? Can you agree with that?

Dr. Brian Evans: I've indicated that as part of the strategic review we are obliged to submit a memorandum to cabinet.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: The report, which may or may not exist, in any event has never been made public.

Dr. Brian Evans: What has been made public are those initiatives that are being implemented over a period of time, as announced in the budget.

● (1835)

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: On BSE, to follow up on what Mr. Dewar was asking, it's my understanding that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is assuring Canadians that the risk of BSE will not increase in spite of the fairly significant changes that have been made to the budget of CFIA. Is that correct?

Dr. Brian Evans: That's correct. We will—

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: You're reassuring us: don't worry, the risk is low.

Dr. Brian Evans: We have repeatedly indicated that our commitment to surveillance will take us to the point where we can fully demonstrate to all partners and all Canadians and all scientific levels that when we've achieved eradication we will maintain our surveillance to the level of having the necessary statistical information and international confidence, and that we will exceed all prescribed standards to protect human and animal health. We will exceed those standards required for us to be categorized as a country that is effectively controlling BSE.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: And you wouldn't give Canadians that assurance based on anecdotal evidence; I presume you would do it based on a clinical scientific risk assessment. Is that the case?

Dr. Brian Evans: I would correct one word there: “clinical”. BSE can be seen in animals before they demonstrate clinical signs. Our testing program is designed to test all animals that show neurological signs consistent with BSE, but it also targets those populations by age and geographic region that have the potential to incubate BSE even prior to their showing clinical disease.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Simply put, was a risk assessment actually done?

Dr. Brian Evans: We do continuous risk assessment on our BSE activities as it relates to surveillance, as it relates to feed, as it relates to SRM removal from human food.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: When was the most recent of these regular assessment risks done?

Dr. Brian Evans: They are done on an annual basis, as we relook at our targets.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Can you table the most recent one for us?

Dr. Brian Evans: We can table what has been submitted to the international program on our surveillance activities, yes.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: With respect to the incentive program, as I understand it, the incentive program has been eliminated. Is that fair to say?

Dr. Brian Evans: No, that's not correct.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: It was my understanding that the incentive program has been eliminated, which provides less incentive for farmers to identify cattle potentially with BSE.

Dr. Brian Evans: No, the incentive program has not been discontinued. It continues to this day. It's actually not an incentive program; it's truly a reimbursement program, which was introduced in 2003 to both facilitate the collection of samples in terms of offsetting costs incurred by producers who identify an animal of interest to us and in terms of that animal's disposal. So that could involve either reimbursing the dead stock collector, so that they're not charged for pickup of that animal, and so it can be brought to a sampling location; or it may represent a small amount of money to help the producer, should he opt to bury that animal on the farm, to cover the costs up to a maximum of $75 to do that.

It's a reimbursement program, not an incentive program. It was intended as part of an awareness education effort in the early days of BSE as well.

Might I add that producers in this country have demonstrated outstanding stewardship. That's the very basis on which we are at twice the level of our anticipated recovery of BSE samples.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Evans.

As a cow producer, I want to say thank you to the CFIA for the great work they have done in BSE surveillance. Of the animals that we have found, not a single one of them has entered the food system. This very last one is another example of it getting caught on the farm before it gets into the system. The animal is put down and tested at that point. The majority of the cattle have been found at the farm gate rather than in a facility.

There's no doubt that the rigorous system that we have in place in Canada is world-renowned and respected, and there is true cost associated with it as it affects us at the farm gate as producers. I simply want to thank CFIA for that on behalf of producers.

Mr. Miller, the floor is yours.

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thank you.

And thanks to our guests for being here today.

I'd like to apologize on behalf of the opposition for keeping you sitting and waiting for an hour and a half, but I am very happy that you're here. It's very interesting to sit and listen to the questions. Every question and misconception that the opposition brought up today you have rebuked, and that's good. That made it worth coming here today, to straighten that out.

The one thing I do need to touch on a little further, and the chairman just did—

● (1840)

Hon. Wayne Easter: That's your opinion, Larry.

Mr. Larry Miller: It's my time, Wayne. You had yours.

On BSE inspection, it's second to none and it's very safe here. As a beef producer, I take real exception to Mr. Dewar's comments implying that basically our Canadian beef here isn't safe, isn't inspected, whatever he was trying to say. And it comes from a lack of knowledge out there, I think, more than anything, the fact that he thinks that agriculture starts and stops at the farmers' market. I have nothing against farmers' markets; they're a great tool for agriculture producers to market their products locally to Canadian consumers.

People like him, who bring out this kind of thing...you would have to call him the k.d. lang of Parliament for trying to dispute our great beef business here in Canada.

Mr. Evans, you stated that CFIA's role in the past has been to ensure through inspection that industry, processors, manufacturers, etc., are conforming to the standards put in place by government. Is there any change in CFIA's role in that aspect?

Mr. Mayers.

Mr. Paul Mayers: No, there is no change in CFIA's responsibility to oversee, to enforce, to demonstrate compliance. That continues to be the case. There is no shift in CFIA's mandate; nor, as Dr. Evans has already indicated, is there any change in terms of priority. Food safety and the protection of human health will continue to be our number one priority.

Mr. Larry Miller: Thank you.

Any changes that have been enacted have been made public. Changes don't get made without consultation. Is that a correct statement?

Dr. Brian Evans: Yes. As was indicated in response to the previous member, those areas where we have implemented—that is, our avian influenza efforts—have been made public. Other areas that we will be moving on will be done through a consultation process and full disclosure and transparency, not just with stakeholders in Canada, but again, recognizing our international obligations. We would not be undertaking to do anything that isn't consistent with the expectations of our international partners as well.

Mr. Larry Miller: Thanks very much.

We tend to lose track of time in this place, but earlier we had a motion before this committee that was passed unanimously to do a review of all inspection costs, whether they be at the border with products going in and out or in slaughter facilities, those kinds of things. Will this review possibly come out with anything that may either make it cheaper for farmers or producers or get rid of some of the bureaucracy to make it easier?

Can you comment on that at all?

Mr. Paul Mayers: As this committee has advised, and recognizing the challenges faced by the industry, the agency did bring forward a proposal to offset some of those pressures on a time-limited basis by remitting certain fees from the previous year, and that process is currently moving forward. Again, it is not an elimination, but it is in recognition of the pressures; and on the advice of this committee and others, the CFIA undertook to reduce some of the costs borne by parts of the industry.

As you've noted, the commitment to a fulsome review of user fees is also an element that the agency has initiated. There is a working group for a review of user fees that has worked with parts of the industry. We also have a broad commitment to look at the entire suite of fees collected in relation to the delivery of agency programs where such fees are charged.

Mr. Larry Miller: Thank you.

Mr. Evans, I know you've been managing director, if that's the proper title, for just a couple of years, but you've been with CFIA for a long time. I hope I didn't say anything wrong there, but my point is that the opposition has tried to make it sound like doing a review is a bad thing. I would suggest, and correct me if I'm wrong, that any department under any government from time to time is asked to do a review, and all for the good—nothing is ever perfect—to try to find improvements.

Under the former government, although you were in the veterinary field, do you ever remember a time when a review was asked for?

● (1845)

Dr. Brian Evans: My time with CFIA dates to the creation of the agency in 1997, in various roles, as you have indicated.

As CFIA, we have undertaken both self-initiated and.... Again, as we've tried to make very clear to this committee and to Canadians in all of our communications, we live in a world where risk is ever-changing, whether it relates to food safety and the food supply or whether it relates to animal health and animal disease movements internationally and in Canada, and certainly we've seen the devastation in our forestry sector and in our plant sector as well because of invasive species and climate change.

So I think it is absolutely mandatory—and it is the only responsible way to effectively manage risk to public health, animal health, and plant health—to undertake these reviews on an ongoing basis. Over the course of my time at CFIA, as I say, we have undertaken these reviews as part of a commitment to continuous improvement to ensure that we are using the best available science and the best available practices to ensure that we are providing Canadians the best level of support we possibly can.

Mr. Larry Miller: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Larry. Your time has expired.

Madame Thi Lac.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Good afternoon.

I'm going to ask you to answer briefly, since I have five questions and only five minutes to ask them and hear your answers.

As you are no doubt aware, there is a research centre in my riding of Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot. Here we're talking about the Food Inspection Agency. On the page 2 of your speaking notes, you say there won't be any job losses. By that, do you mean there won't be any position cuts, or could positions be reassigned to other centres? Can you state that no positions will be affected in my riding?

My second question is as follows. You say: "Such a single-window approach will provide increased bilingual service, from the existing 20 hours to 24 hours, seven days a week." The number of bilingual public servants in Saint-Hyacinthe has to be higher than in your other centres. Can you state that the centre in my riding is a key location for maintaining and increasing the services that you characterize as bilingual?

I'm going to ask you to answer those first two questions briefly. Then I'll ask you my other questions.

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you.

I can assure you that our laboratory...we have a laboratory, not a research facility. I can only speak to the CFIA laboratory. If there is an Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada research centre, I am unable to speak to their programming. But from the perspective of St-Hyacinthe CFIA laboratory, there are no programming changes being implemented there that would result in any job losses whatsoever from that lab facility.

With respect to bilingual service, again, there is no program effort to reduce bilingual capacity or service out of our St-Hyacinthe facility.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: Mr. Mayers says there were no changes to the agency's mandate, but the question I ask myself and that farmers are asking themselves as well is whether there will be any in future.

Will any changes be made to your mandate, and, if so, what will they be?

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Evans: The mandate of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is established under the Canadian Food Inspection Agency Act. We are not aware of any efforts on the part of Parliament to review the CFIA Act or to change the mandate of our organization.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Mayers, it's your answer I would have liked to hear on the subject. You said a few moments ago that no changes had been made to the agency's mandate.

Mr. Evans has just answered, but, for our part today, we're considering the entire matter that the media reported this summer following Mr. Pomerleau's dismissal. There was some question of a plan for the future, which was not publicly announced. However, some of the media no doubt got wind of bits of information about this plan since we were able to read some information on aspects of it.

You're saying there were no changes. However, as you'll understand perfectly well, we, the farmers and the general public, all those who are aware of the fact that food inspection is also a public health matter, want to know whether there will be changes to the agency's mandate and, if so, what their nature will be.

Earlier we were told that everything that had been made public by the media was untrue.

● (1850)

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Mayers: Again, I can only reiterate what my colleague has said, that the mandate of the agency is laid out in legislation and we are not aware of any proposals to review that legislation. The initiatives that my colleague overviewed earlier point to the interest that the agency has expressed in modernizing certain aspects of its programs and taking advantage of the opportunity of the strategic review to review its programs and to make adjustments in terms of those programs, while continuing—and it is important that I stress "while continuing"—to maintain its priority focus on the protection of human health, the protection of animal health, and the protection of our plant resources in this country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: That's your general mandate, but as regards the information published in the media, we have some concerns, and they are over the changes to the mandate that would jeopardize people's health. For example, there's the possibility that the agency's inspection mandate is more about oversight and that the industry will take charge of a number of aspects of inspection. That's part of the changes to the mandate that were made public. Mr. Evans, for his part, said they would not be made.

Whatever the case may be, there is a plan that we are not aware of. So why not disclose it publicly and make a clean breast of it.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Mayers: If you would permit me to use an example of the initiatives to reflect on the issue of modernization, as has been noted, one of the initiatives is a feed inspection harmonization. That recognizes that we have been working with the industry to improve their practices in terms of control in feed mills by applying effective process controls—in essence, the HACCP system. In recognition of industry's progress in implementing that system, we are modernizing and therefore adjusting our inspection approach to align it with the effective implementation of that strategy.

So do we change our focus? Absolutely not. Does the priority in terms of protecting animal and human health as it relates to potential contamination of feed change? Absolutely not.

In fact, we improve our ability to control hazards by shifting away from an approach that would require the end product to be demonstrated to be safe to instead demonstrating throughout the process of producing a feed that there are effective controls on the potential points where hazards might be introduced. In essence, the modernization allows for the inspection approach in verifying that those controls are in place, that they are effective, and that they are doing what they're intended to do in controlling hazards.

We are augmenting our ability to demonstrate the ultimate safety of the product by modernizing the approach in alignment with what we've been working with the industry to accomplish, which is to improve their overall process of controls rather than simply relying on demonstrating that the end product is ultimately without a particular hazard.

The Chair: Your time has expired.

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to commend the members of CFIA for their presentation.

It seemed to me that when I first heard Mr. Easter, the member for Malpeque, talking about reductions taking place and funding cuts, he was somehow implying that Canadians would be less safe. I'm comforted to hear that funding was not cut, but in fact that you're better utilizing—

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chairman, on a point of order, we weren't talking about their taking place; we're talking about their being proposed in a secret document that we've yet to see.

● (1855)

The Chair: That's not a point of order; it's a debate.

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: It's interesting. What you're saying, as I understand it, is that it's using the dollars you have more effectively to respond in a more efficient manner to ensure that the risk is managed properly. Would that be correct? As risk is changing, you have to change the way you do things to meet that risk. You therefore need to redirect funds. In the end, I hear you say you're doing more, not less, to protect the health and safety of Canadians. Indeed that's what we're interested in, and that's what we hope you continue to do.

I understand that the CFIA will continue to provide front-line screening to ensure that imported products meet Canadian requirements. Canadians are very interested in that. Is that correct?

Dr. Brian Evans: Certainly under the food safety action plan a number of those elements looked at how we can better ensure that before the product arrives at the border it has met our standard in terms of working with and reviewing in concert with other countries importing from various countries and, more broadly, sharing inspection reports so we can jointly identify areas where we both have concerns so it can be addressed collectively. It will certainly involve much more of a presence from Canada in the country of origin, either through audit processes or other means of validating that their methods are in line with our standards. It will involve our activities at the border as well, to ensure that importers and others who are importing products into Canada can demonstrate the products they are bringing into the country meet our standard.

We will continue to do any investigations and compliance activities to the highest level possible. Should something enter the marketplace where it legitimately does not belong, we will exercise our full authorities on the food recall basis, and we will continue to inform Canadians of any risk that has somehow entered the system.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I think it's fair to say that Canadians want to be sure our system is working properly. You've taken the steps to ensure that. They're also interested in knowing that items being imported meet standards that we've grown to expect. They want to be sure that somebody is on top of what's coming into the country through imports.

From what I hear from you, there is an audit process with the country of origin. I would take it that you also have a product inspection and tests that are conducted at the point of entry. I'm assuming you're doing at least what you've done in the past, perhaps more. Maybe you can elaborate on that a bit.

Dr. Brian Evans: We certainly do have an annual residue monitoring plan. Residues can be chemical, they can be biological hazards, they can be direct tampering, and they can be physical hazards as well. That program is published on an annual basis on our website.

In addition to our scheduled frequency of testing, we do random and unannounced testing of products entering into Canada, in conjunction with the importers of those products before they enter the marketplace, and we have programming that also tests product in the marketplace to a single standard, whether it's domestically produced or imported.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: So it's fair to say that as Canadians we can rest assured that through your reallocation of funds and the proposed funding, the whole objective in what you're doing is to ensure that food is safer, not less safe, and that Canadians can continue to expect the great service that you've been providing to this point.

Dr. Brian Evans: We recognize again that the risks, as we've said, in food safety are ever-changing, and therefore we're adapting our programs to make sure that the standards we are meeting are those that Canadians expect from us and deserve to have from us, that we are protecting them and their families to the full extent possible, with the best available resources and the best available design of programs that exist anywhere in the world.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll ask some fast questions and give you lots of ice time to elaborate.

First, when will we see the report?

Second, on May 15, when the senior executives appeared here, there was no mention of the presentation of any plan to modify the food inspection systems. I'm asking if the senior executives were aware of the plan when they appeared. If they did, how do you explain their failure to mention it?

Third, since the proposed reform of the inspection system would affect your expenditure budget, wouldn't the transparency obligation binding on deputy ministers have required the witnesses to tell us about the intention to cut CFIA spending?

Fourth, is the proposed reform not part of your 2008-09 report on plans and priorities? Shouldn't it be part of it? If so, why wasn't it included?

Fifth, I would like your definition of what is a communication risk.

Last, for us all, why was this report not made public?

Thank you.

● (1900)

Dr. Brian Evans: If I may, I think I've captured the points.

I am not in a position to dictate or respond to the first question of when any submission made to cabinet would be made public. As a non-partisan public servant, I am not privy to that information, so I regret I cannot provide you a fulsome response to that.

With respect to the appearance on May 15, which I believe was the appearance on main estimates...if I'm not mistaken, that was the main estimates appearance. Our main estimates in fact have been tabled, and those main estimates certainly do account for the planned expenditures on the part of CFIA. I'm aware that at that time there was brief discussion around the budget announcements of February and how the agency intended to implement those over the period of time, as reflected in our estimates, and at that time, as I recall, we had an extended discussion around not only this fiscal year's but projected fiscal years' impacts on the agency as a result of the sunsetting of tied funds that we had received for other initiatives in the past.

The 2008-09 report on plans and priorities, like all of our reports on plans and priorities in previous years, do make reference to adjustments in our inspection systems that are planned. The issue around, again, inspection modernization has been a theme through our submitted plans and priorities reports to Parliament that have been tabled over a several-year period and have reflected the changes in many of the sectors where those types of adoption of HACCP plans have been implemented.

The CFIA does not use the term “communication risks”. Risk communication is something that we do engage ourselves in. Risk communication is that effort on our part to inform Canadians of the environment in which we are operating, and to inform Canadians of ways that they can undertake measures that also protect them beyond the efforts of regulatory programming and industry efforts in that regard.

In that respect, with food safety we have undertaken programs, like FightBAC! and others, with food retailers and food processors that speak to Canadians about how food should be handled from the point of purchase in order to avoid cross-contamination, whether it be E. coli or salmonella. That is part of our efforts on risk communication and would be the type of construct that we would use to help inform Canadians so that they can take actions and make choices that best protect their family as well.

I hope I've answered your questions, honourable member. Unfortunately I can't read my written note of your last point.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: It dealt with why the report was never made public. Who really would attach the label “communication risk” to a report? Would it come from the minister's office, because making it public would not be politically feasible? It wouldn't be the public service doing that. You wouldn't say, gee, I don't think the public should know about this; it would be the minister who would say this is pretty volatile.

Dr. Brian Evans: Again, I'm not privy to the phrase “communication risk”, because it is not one that we use within CFIA. We talk about transparent disclosure and working with Canadians to understand risk.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Okay. No, no, I know.... When we talk about the public service in terms of its obligations for transparency, is this not something on which it would be incumbent to tell a standing committee what the intentions behind these modifications are?

Dr. Brian Evans: Again, as public servants, we endeavour to the full extent possible to share with the standing committee our views of what we're trying to do and how we attempt to achieve that. But as has been mentioned before, there are processes we have to respect, as non-partisan public servants, that deal with cabinet confidences, which we are not in a position to comment on.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we have Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I have a couple of questions, and then I'll split my time with Mr. Miller.

Mr. Evans, presumably the 5% of potential duplicity and changes that could be made, as put forward by your organization, were signed off by you. Is that correct?

● (1905)

Dr. Brian Evans: The submission of the strategic review is signed by the chief financial officer and the president of the agency.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Now, we have already established, and even Mr. Easter has established, that you have a long history with this agency, since its inception. There's no doubt that you have done a lot of great work for our country and our food safety program and the science we have in place. Would you ever sign off on a recommendation that you thought would be detrimental to the health and safety of Canadians?

Dr. Brian Evans: I appreciate the kind comments of the committee, and I would just like to clarify and to have on the public record the fact that as the current executive vice-president and chief veterinary officer, I am extremely proud of and amazed at the level of professionalism and competency that our almost 7,000 staff bring to the task each and every day in what they do. Certainly in my responsibilities as executive vice-president or associate of the president, I can assure you that with any opportunity I have to review submissions on behalf of the agency, I undertake on the most dedicated basis possible to use every ounce of my professionalism and scientific understanding to ensure that we are providing our best advice on what we think is absolutely in Canadians' collective best interests to ensure that we can continue to meet the standards necessary to protect them and their families.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Absolutely, and I have no doubt about that; I just wanted to give you the opportunity to put that on the record.

Mr. Mayers, maybe this question will go to you, but when we talked about modernization, such as the hazard analysis and critical control point, you mentioned some of the countries that the opposition is a little scared of following, such as Australia and some other countries, and you and Mr. Evans also mentioned that some of these preventative systems—and it makes sense to catch the problem before it hits the food chain, which we do—have already been in place for the better part of 15 years now.

Could you give us an example of some of these systems and how they've been working?

Mr. Paul Mayers: Certainly the best example is the application of the hazard analysis and critical control point in meat production. While that approach is now mandatory but was not for 15 years, it has been in the system for that period of time and has demonstrated its effectiveness, not just here in Canada but around the world. In fact, it is well recognized, as I believe my colleague made reference to earlier, within the international community under the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the international standard-setting body for foods, which recognizes HACCP as an effective system for controlling risk in food production.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you.

Mr. Miller.

Mr. Larry Miller: Thanks.

I have another question. I think Mr. Dewar earlier had the impression that either—and I'm going to use BSE as an example—every cow was checked or maybe every animal should have been checked. I don't think any country in the world checks every cow to see whether it has BSE, or checks every hen or broiler to see if it has avian flu. You put in place what I'll call random checks, for lack of another term.

I was reading about canned goods, as an example. It's my understanding—and you can correct me if I'm wrong—that about 2% of canned products actually get checked and that kind of thing. Is that a fair statement?

Dr. Brian Evans: If you're amenable, honourable member...it's not random testing. This is targeted testing, based on analyses that are determined as to higher-risk products and lower-risk products, and those targets are set and reviewed, depending on findings. There is an ongoing flexibility in the system.

For example, you made specific reference to canned testing. Canned testing can be in regard to can integrity; it can be sampling of specific products for specific risks associated, whether they be biological pathogens or other things. The nature of the very programming is such that you have an expected level of find. If it exceeds that level of find, you up the ante, and that testing is then immediately increased.

In a number of our programs—a good example would be fish inspection—we have an ongoing level of detection based on demonstration of the country of its compliance. If we find a shipment out of compliance, we go to 100% testing for the next 10 shipments. That's the very nature of the program. It has to be responsive to what it finds.

● (1910)

The Chair: Mr. Miller, your time has expired.

Madame Bennett, you have the floor.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Thanks very much.

I would just like us to be clear about the process of program review. We went through the 2005 experience, and if you google "program review", you'll find at CMHC, posted on its website: these are our contributions for program review; we've found $6 million here and we're going to put it there.

In terms of finding 5% cuts in a regulatory agency, how do you go about that? And did you, at the beginning, have the reassurance that you would get to keep the money you found in order to reallocate it in a professional and scientific way within your own agency? It's a bit concerning that a regulatory agency would be cut because of what we're here today to look at.

So from a discussion document, presenting the discussion document to the minister, to the minister saying, "Oh, we can't do that"—like cutting the Snowbirds or something—to the minister preparing the memorandum to cabinet with you, to it going to cabinet and the cabinet saying, "No, you can't do that"; to this rumour that apparently this secret report was approved by Treasury Board; to again, whether or not you can look us in the eye now and say there have been no cuts, but there's an idea floating around that, come 2009, 2010, or 2011, there might be reductions in what were planned to be increases.... So I don't think the people of Canada want any fooling around, that there were no cuts; they want to know, were there actual reductions in what had been planned to be an increase, as opposed to there being no cuts and our just saying how that works?

I'm worried that we don't have the full story, and we won't until we have the report. In that process, from a discussion document to implementing a change in a budget, at some point did the minister or somebody say, "No, you can't do that"? And is there a second report that's reversing this plan? Where are we actually in these very specific rumours about cuts that the people of Canada want to know about?

I think we did hear, Dr. Evans, that the report does exist and that you've pleaded the fifth amendment, or whatever we do in Canada. So how do we deal with the significant communication risk, that somebody in the minister's office or somebody in PMO decided that this report of last November is too hot for public consumption? What are we to do now, in your job, to reassure Canadians when this is out there and Canadians are concerned?

Dr. Brian Evans: I think your first question was, did we have any assurance as we started down the process that any opportunities to reallocate money to internal priorities would be supported? The short answer to that is no. The very nature—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I forgot to ask, has CFIA always been included in program review?

Dr. Brian Evans: Yes. Since we were created—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's never been exempt from program review?

Dr. Brian Evans: No.

The ERC stands for...?

Mr. Gordon White (Vice-President, Finance, Administration and Information Technology, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): The expenditure review committee reductions that were put into place over the period 2005-06 to 2007-08 reduced our budget by about $24 million, so we were not exempt from ERC.

In program review prior to that, it was around the time the agency was created, so there was a different perspective there. But we have never been exempted from any of the reviews.

● (1915)

Dr. Brian Evans: With respect to the process that you asked about, the expenditure management system, as I've indicated, requires all government departments and agencies. All of them are covered over a four-year cycle. It's our understanding that we will go through this process again in three or four years. Under that, based on our A-base allocation, it was determined that we should identify up to 5% of program activities where it was felt that either the programs were not delivering to the standards that they should be delivering to in order to protect Canadians, or that there was an opportunity to reallocate those resources to areas of higher priority, the effort—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Dr. Evans, my question was this. In reviewing your testimony at priority and planning, you did say: "And we'll be working with industry to minimize food safety risks, so that we can adjust our program to be less prescriptive and have less oversight". I guess we want to know exactly what that means: to have less oversight. Were you telegraphing at that time that there were going to be these kinds of cuts or harmonization with industry to put more responsibility to industry, which, as my colleague has said, will go back to the farmers, no question? I would simply like to know what you mean by having less oversight.

The Chair: Dr. Bennett, that's your last question.

Dr. Evans, do you want to respond?

Dr. Brian Evans: I'll try to be brief, Mr. Chairman.

Less prescriptive, again, in previous testimony relates back to the recommendations from this committee and the fact that there are elements of our program that have been viewed as having created a non-competitive sector—for example, issues of record retention on the part of producers at the farm level, or other programming activity in terms of the frequency of our inspection activities that are viewed by some as having negatively impacted the competitiveness of the Canadian sector.

There were two initiatives. One was a Canadian Federation of Independent Business report card on CFIA. We undertook to work with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business to look at how we could regulate and deliver our activities in a way that still achieved the regulatory outcome but was less intrusive and less costly for industry to meet. Those were undertaken, as were the government's paperwork burden reduction Initiative to look at, again in terms of regulatory issues, the number of documents that have to be demonstrated to us in order for us to provide a document, for example. Could those be streamlined? Could they be brought together? Could the reporting frequency be reduced? Those are the sorts of initiatives that we undertook to do in terms of being less prescriptive.

Less oversight refers to those areas where in certain circumstances...for example, when we introduced the enhanced feed ban that we referred to with Mr. Dewar. Removing SRM at the top end of the feed system requires us to have less oversight further down the system, at the level of the producer. We don't have to go onto the farm to verify that the feeds they are receiving have had the specified risk materials taken away at that point. The oversight has shifted to the top end of the spectrum, if you will, to make sure that it never enters the system in the first place. The less oversight doesn't mean that overall the program is less effective or that we're reducing our commitment to the program; it simply means we're shifting the point at which we provide that level of verification.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Evans.

As is the practice of the committee, we've gone around and asked questions from each member of the committee.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I'm not going to debate the issue, but I do believe that the committee televised rooms are available tomorrow. Mr. Lauzon can't be here, but maybe a taped recording of the meeting would be good for him. I think if we have the opportunity, as a committee, for the public to see the witnesses tomorrow, then we should gain consensus around the room and utilize the televised facilities that are available to us for the next witnesses.

The Chair: We have a request for a televised meeting tomorrow in Centre Block.

Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

From our side's point of view, we've been open and transparent, as we have been for the entire time we've been in government. We have no problem with the general public seeing Mr. Easter continually debunked, with the myths he's putting forward.

● (1920)

The Chair: Mr. Miller.

Mr. Larry Miller: I think something should be cleared up. Some of Ms. Bennett's comments a couple of minutes ago insinuated that Dr. Evans was pleading the fifth amendment. I think we all know what that means. In defence of him, I think Mr. Evans has nothing to hide here; he is simply complying and answering under the rules. I think it was uncalled for.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. St. Amand, if you're talking about the same point of order, or the suggestion that we have a televised meeting, I'll entertain it.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: It's not quite on that point. I want to talk about when we can expect compliance with the motion that passed a couple of hours ago now.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: When we see the report.

The Chair: There was no timeline tied to the report; it requests that we get a report.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Let's have a new motion, then.

The Chair: You have the motion in front of you, and that was struck out. We'll see when we can get one. We'll put in the request, as per usual for committee. I will be contacting the ministry through the clerk and request the report.

The motion demands that the government provide the committee with the plan to ban critical food safety inspections as reportedly approved by Treasury Board in November 2007. There is no timeline tied to it. In due time we will, as quickly as we can with the workload we have in front of us right now, get that over to the ministry.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: On that point, the very senior responsible officials of CFIA are before us. Whether they can admit that they have the report or not, they surely do have the report, and I will be asking these officials to provide the report to us tomorrow.

The Chair: As I have read out of Marleau and Montpetit, and as was already said by Dr. Evans, that was a confidential memorandum submitted to cabinet, and they're obligated by the rules to avoid putting themselves in a situation of turning over these confidential discussions between government and public servants. That has been practised in Parliament since its inception. It has gone through many governments, including Liberal and Conservative governments. It is something we all abide by.

With that, I think I'll leave it up to the ministry to decide what they wish to do with it.

Was that a recommendation or a motion?

Hon. Wayne Easter: It's a recommendation, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: So it's not a motion, it's a recommendation. There doesn't seem—

Hon. Wayne Easter: I think we have consensus here. I don't think there's opposition.

The Chair: As a reminder to committee members, we have PIPSC lined up for eight o'clock tomorrow morning in Centre Block, room 237C.

I want to thank our witnesses, Dr. Evans, Mr. Mayers, and Mr. White, for coming in and briefing us on very short notice and being able to give us the facts we were discussing earlier.

I do appreciate your coming in and having that brief prepared.

With that, I'll entertain a motion to adjourn.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I so move.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:
Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante :
http://www.parl.gc.ca
