



**Alberta Agriculture and Forestry,
Alberta Health Services and
Alberta Health
Food Safety**

October 2017

About This Audit

Food safety is an important human health concern. Ensuring that the food we eat is safe involves regulation, and oversight, at all stages of food production, preparation and sale. Alberta Health Services (AHS), the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry (Agriculture) share responsibility for food safety in the province. At a high level:

- Health and Agriculture set legislation and policy
- Agriculture monitors and inspects abattoirs (slaughterhouses) and meat processing facilities
- AHS is responsible for inspecting facilities that prepare or sell food, such as grocery stores, work camps and restaurants

In our October 2006 public report we made 10 recommendations to improve food safety in Alberta. We followed up and reported on the implementation progress of these recommendations in 2009 and 2013.¹ After the most recent follow-up audit, two of the original 2006 recommendations remained outstanding.

Ensuring that the food we eat is safe involves regulation, and oversight, at all stages of food production, preparation and sale.

Audit Objective and Scope

Our audit objective was to determine if AHS, the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry had:

- integrated their strategies to ensure a coordinated and effective approach to food safety
- improved public reporting on food safety in Alberta
- eliminated inconsistencies in how meat processing facilities were inspected

Our scope focused solely on the departments' and AHS's responsibilities for enforcing food safety as set out in provincial acts, regulations, standards and codes. We did not look at those federal government departments and agencies that oversee federal legislation for food produced in Alberta but sold outside the province.

We conducted our work in accordance with the *Auditor General Act* and the standards for assurance engagements set out in the CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance.

What We Examined

We interviewed department and AHS management and reviewed relevant documentation.

We conducted our field work in April and May 2017, and substantially completed our audit on June 22, 2017.

¹ *Annual Report of the Auditor General of Alberta 2005–2006*, Volume 1, pages 63–107; *Report of the Auditor General of Alberta—October 2009*, pages 87–115; *Report of the Auditor General of Alberta—October 2013*, pages 51–63.

Albertans need to know that effective food safety systems are in place and working at all stages of food production, from meat processing plants to restaurants.

Conclusion

We conclude that AHS, the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry have achieved the outcomes described in the audit objective:

- AHS, Health and Agriculture jointly developed an integrated food safety work plan, and senior management from all three entities now work together to improve provincial food safety policies and program delivery through the Food Safety Modernization Committee.
- Both AHS and Agriculture now publicly report food safety facility inspection results on their websites.
- AHS and Agriculture now have similar practices to each other for inspecting businesses that both process and sell meat.

Why This Conclusion Matters to Albertans

Food safety is essential to good public health. To trust that the food they eat is safe, Albertans need to know that effective food safety systems are in place and working at all stages of food production, from meat processing plants to restaurants. To have this assurance, Albertans also need to know that AHS, the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry are co-operating and working together on food safety.

Findings

Integrated food safety work plan—**recommendation implemented**

Context

In previous audit reports we noted that the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry needed to strengthen the coordination of their food safety programs to ensure a coordinated and effective approach to food safety.

Criteria: the standards of performance and control

The Department of Agriculture and Forestry, the Department of Health and Alberta Health Services should be able to show there are aligned food safety inspection programs with defined objectives and performance measures.

Our follow-up audit findings

In 2014 Agriculture and Health agreed to collaborate to align their food safety activities through the Food Safety Modernization Initiative (FSMI). One outcome from this initiative was the joint development and implementation of an integrated food safety work plan for Alberta.² The FSMI steering committee is made up of senior management representatives from AHS and the two departments.³ The committee has the authority to make decisions and provide direction to various working groups to ensure implementation of the work plan and achieve tangible results.

² The current work plan covers the time period January 1, 2014 to March 31, 2017. Management representatives on the FSMI steering committee told us they are working on refreshing and updating the plan.

³ This committee has terms of reference, and its co-chairs are the executive director of the Health Protection Branch (Alberta Health) and the executive director of the Food Safety Division (Agriculture and Forestry). The committee is accountable to the assistant deputy ministers at Health and Agriculture who are responsible for food safety.

The current plan identifies five priority initiatives and 21 activities to improve food safety in Alberta, with a responsible lead or co-lead identified for each activity. As of April 2017, 16 activities are complete, four are awaiting proposed legislative change or other government approval, and work on one is ongoing.

A tangible result from the work plan is improved food safety reporting. The accountability and working group⁴ developed inspection reporting measures for both AHS and Agriculture that are now in use and publicly posted on their websites.

Public reporting of food safety facility inspection results— recommendation implemented

Context

Previously, we recommended the provincial entities responsible for ensuring food safety in Alberta improve their public reporting to demonstrate the effectiveness of their activities.

Criteria: the standards of performance and control

The Department of Agriculture and Forestry, the Department of Health and Alberta Health Services should be able to show that:

- the results of food safety inspection programs are regularly analyzed, and the results of the analysis are reported to senior management and Albertans
- Albertans have timely access to complete and accurate reporting on the results of food safety inspection programs

Our follow-up audit findings

Current public reporting

Both AHS and Agriculture publicly post the following results of their food safety inspections on their respective websites:

AHS

- restaurant inspection findings⁵
- environmental public health: safe food reporting measure⁶

Agriculture

- processing inspection rates for meat facilities licensed by Agriculture⁷
- percentage of active provincial licensed abattoirs that meet provincial food safety slaughter requirements⁸

A tangible result from the work plan is improved food safety reporting.

4 This group worked on the integrated food safety work plan's third priority initiative, Accountability and Reporting, part of which was to develop a joint approach for food safety measures, indicators and reporting processes.

5 <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/eph/Page3149.aspx>.

6 Percentage of facilities and associated number of routine and/or approval inspections (2015–2016 fiscal year), <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/about/data/ahs-data-safe-food-reporting-fiscal-15-16.pdf>.

7 April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016 (Government of Alberta's fiscal year), [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/fs15533](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/fs15533).

8 Performance measure 2.9, Agriculture and Forestry 2015–16 Annual Report, page 21, [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex16016](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex16016).

Public survey on current public reporting by AHS and Agriculture and Forestry

We commissioned a third-party company to develop and conduct an online survey measuring public opinion about each type of public reporting by AHS and Agriculture.⁹ Of the 1,138 respondents, a clear majority expressed that the reporting:

- should be available and easily accessible by Albertans
- is relevant and useful
- is clearly presented and easy to understand
- provides confidence in food safety programs
- is effective overall

A clear majority of respondents also indicated that (a) before taking the survey they were not aware of these reports being on AHS's or Agriculture's websites and (b) the most useful and informative reporting was the detailed presentation of the restaurant inspection findings. We therefore suggest AHS and Agriculture keep in mind two considerations for future revisions to their public reporting format:

- how to increase public awareness, and visibility, of these reports on their websites
- how to improve the content and usefulness of these reports

Internal reporting

Both AHS and Agriculture have internal performance measures for their food safety inspection programs. For example, AHS has five internal performance measures that it reports quarterly to Health.

Alignment of meat processing facility inspection practices— recommendation implemented

Context

Some meat processing facilities also operate retail food stores to sell their products. These facilities fall under the jurisdiction both of AHS and of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry. Agriculture is responsible for licensing and inspecting the meat processing facilities, while AHS licenses and inspects the stores that sell the meat. Each enforces the requirements of the applicable legislation, standards and regulations it is responsible for.¹⁰

In the past, AHS and Agriculture used different inspection practices from each other: AHS would conduct unannounced inspections (up to three a year for each retail operation), while Agriculture would inspect a meat processing facility through an annual scheduled audit lasting one to three days. Industry representatives had raised concerns about these differences in inspection practices.

Criteria: the standards of performance and control

The Department of Agriculture and Forestry, the Department of Health and Alberta Health Services should:

- have defined roles and responsibilities that are understandable and followed for inspecting all provincially regulated meat processors and processing facilities in Alberta
- use applicable food safety standards for inspecting provincially regulated meat processing facilities

⁹ This survey was conducted from April 18 to 24, 2017 and was weighted to reflect gender, age and regions of the Alberta population according to Statistics Canada.

¹⁰ Agriculture enforces the requirements of the *Meat Inspection Act*, *Meat Inspection Regulation* and *Meat Facility Standards*, while AHS's authority to inspect food establishments is governed by the *Public Health Act*, *Public Health Act Food Regulation*, and *Food Retail and Foodservices Code*.

Our follow-up audit findings

In 2015, Agriculture aligned its meat processing facility inspection practices with AHS's.

- It now conducts up to three unannounced inspections each fiscal year rather than one scheduled annual audit.¹¹
- It developed an inspection form similar to that used by AHS.
- It removed requirements for processors to maintain written food safety programs not mandated by regulations or standards.

Agriculture made these changes after seeking input from AHS, Health and industry representatives. Agriculture conducted a pilot project of its new process in 2014 before fully switching over in 2015.

We examined a sample of meat processing facilities inspected by Agriculture during the fiscal year 2016–2017 and confirmed that the department was following its new inspection process consistently in all regions of the province.

¹¹ Agriculture inspects some processors less than three times annually, as these businesses do not operate year round and inspectors may find them closed when they arrive on site to conduct an inspection.

