



Lessons from the Salmonella-Tainted Tomatoes Case

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The Canadian tomato industry is likely to witness stronger demand as the U.S. FDA has ruled it out as a source of contamination in the ongoing case of salmonella-tainted tomatoes. While this would clearly be good for Canadian producers, the benefit from any sales increase must be seen as fortuitous and may be short-lived.

The lesson that the industry and governments should take from this episode is the opportunity to more permanently shift demand in Canada's favour by fostering consumer confidence in the safety of its agri-food products. This has longer-term benefits and, by assuaging consumer food safety concerns, would lift sales and mitigate producers' risk.

Costs associated with a 'food safety event' can be significant. Producers can experience significant temporary or permanent reduction in business activity and may face expensive recalls, clean-up and litigation. Given the scope and growing complexity of the food supply system—the number of times that products change hands, new food sources, and new production practices—safety cannot be guaranteed. However, food safety 'events' could be limited and, if they occur, could be quickly contained.

Rising affluence and growing awareness of the negative effects of unsafe food have led consumers to demand a 'safety quotient' in food products. Producers are taking steps to meet this trend and governments are also beefing up their food safety programmes. While progress has been made, more needs to be done.

If Canada could build a name as a source of safe food, its producers would face stronger, more sustained demand with the inclusion of a 'safety trait' seen as a differentiating factor. While the 'infrastructure' for a safe food supply involves several elements, all of which are in place to some degree—regulatory framework, inspection system, and industry self-regulation—a key component would be an effective trace-back capability from consumer to farm.

A proper trace-back capability would avert food safety problems by emphasizing the responsibility of every 'node' and player in the value chain. This would push all participants in the value chain to promote a safe food supply. 'Buy-in' and the impact on safety would be greater if the expected net benefits are highlighted. A good trace-back system would also facilitate identification of the cause and scope of any food safety event and thus help contain fallout.

Though traceability is a key component of the Agricultural Policy Framework, programmes in this area are lacking in Canada and in North America as a whole¹. There is generally no regulation requiring it and approaches across Canada are varied, with systems typically developed independently to cater to a single purpose or organization. Thus, there is good reason for Canada to move quickly to establish comprehensive trace-back systems.

1 In a recent study 'Food Safety Performance World Ranking 2008' by the Research Network in Food Systems, University of Regina, Canada's performance on Traceability and Management was considered as "average" amongst other nations included in the study. North American countries performed poorly in this category. Canada ranked thirteenth while the United States ranked sixteenth.

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