



Safety first for Ontario food

When it comes to foods produced in Ontario, safety is the No. 1 concern, say the experts who raise our meats and vegetables, tracking them from farm gate to grocery store shelves.

Thanks to industry-wide initiatives and a spirit of wholehearted co-operation, food safety is an ongoing commitment in the province. New programs ensure farms strictly adhere to best policies and practices, that third parties audit the entire chain, from farm to store shelves, and that any suspected failure can be quickly and accurately identified and corrected.

"There is a terrific focus on food safety; terrific is the best way to describe it," says David Stewart, executive director of the Ontario Cattlemen's Association, based in Guelph, Ont. His group represents 19,000 beef producers; together, they supply about 60% of the steaks, roasts and hamburger served on Ontario dinner tables.

With the beef industry, for example, safety starts with a program set up three years ago and approved by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Ontario cattlemen take a course, run their operations according to written guidelines and welcome third party audits to ensure compliance.

"The focus is on things that can be controlled," he says. "That includes use of medications, animal feed and humane treatment and overall health. The stress now is where it belongs — with the farmer and the processors and not with safety through enforcement."

That commitment is also being driven by both the processors and the grocery store chains as well, says Paul Medeiros, manager of con-

sulting services at the Guelph Food Technology Centre. The centre works with the industry to develop new products and processes, train staff, provide consulting services and conduct third-party safety audits.

"Companies such as Loblaws come to us to audit the safety measures taken by suppliers," he says. "They want to ensure their operations are 100% safe before working with them.

"We are working now to become a Safe Quality Food 2000 and a British Retail Consortium food code certifying agent for processing plants. We will also likely move to SQF1000 as well. That is the international standard that certifies producers."

Ontario is also increasingly well served should one of those rare occurrences take place. A two-year-old, not-for-profit agency, called OnTrace Agri-Food Traceability, is well underway in its goal of being able to identify with great precision all food producers in the province, what they produce and where and when they shipped their meats, fruits and vegetables.

"We now have a complete list of all 220,000 agricultural operations in Ontario," says Brian Sterling, OnTrace's chief executive officer. "That covers everything from hobby farms to major producers.

"It will take a few more years to complete the rest of the puzzle. But in the end we will be able to almost instantly track any problem right back through the entire supply chain to the source and take measures to correct it."

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