

## Ontario's contract meat inspectors speak out

# Survey Report

### **1. Survey Method**

From Sept. 8 to Sept. 14, 2003, four Ontario contract meat inspectors conducted a phone survey of their fellow inspectors. The objective of the survey was to discuss contract meat inspectors' working conditions in detail. It also provided inspectors with an opportunity to respond to recent comments by Ministry officials about the meat inspection system.

There are an estimated 121 contract meat inspectors currently employed for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food<sup>1</sup> (OMAF). Twenty-five (25) per cent of contract meat inspectors are women.

For the survey, inspectors were called at home. Forty-six (46) inspectors, or approximately 38 per cent of the total, responded to the survey. Thirty-three (33) per cent of respondents were women. Respondents came from each geographic region in the province.

Some of the contract meat inspectors declined to participate in the survey for fear of retaliation by OMAF. As we note below, their livelihoods are dependent upon the hours allocated by the area manager on a weekly basis. Many fear loss of work if they "cross" their area managers.

### **2. Changes to meat inspection – chain of events**

OMAF has used contract meat inspectors since the early 1990s. Initially, contract meat inspectors were not the core work force. Rather, they were used were used in some areas to supplement the work of full-time permanent inspectors.

In 1996, approximately 150 full-time, permanent meat inspectors were laid off. OMAF hired independent contract meat inspectors to conduct inspections. All contract inspectors were told to bill OMAF directly for their wages and expenses.

OMAF has been hard hit by Tory cutbacks. According Justice O'Connor's report on the Walkerton Inquiry (Part I), the OMAF had 2,400 full-time equivalent staff in 1990 and just 613 in 2000. During this time, five colleges that provided dedicated training to inspectors were closed, and training was centralized into a four-week course in Guelph.

By 1997, OMAF had introduced a new system for allocating slaughter hours. Abattoirs were told to make adjustments to their operations. Those that did not were required to buy inspection hours from the branch. A 1998 consultant's report outlined that this new system was created in an operating environment where there was intense pressure to reduce and avoid costs. The George Morris Centre report stated that the "Cabinet has cut the Ministry's and the Ministry has cut the [Meat Industry Inspection Branch]'s budget substantially and continues to in 1997/98.

---

<sup>1</sup> This number is based upon an OMAF document received in early September. The Ontario contract meat inspectors group used a separate, but comparable, phone and mailing list with 117 names of contract meat inspectors.

This leads to pressure to reduce internal costs, operate more efficiently, and reduce inspection hours, all of which have been accomplished over the past few years.”<sup>2</sup>

Budget pressure meant a move to cost recovery. The new system penalizes plants for making inefficient use of inspection time. If the plant does not complete its slaughter within the hours allotted, OMAF then charges the abattoir owner for the overtime inspection.

Inspectors are now told that, in circumstances where an abattoir has not paid its “overtime” bill (the bill for cutting beyond the allocated hours), inspection and slaughter must stop. Inspectors are, effectively, placed in the position of being bill collectors.

Further cuts hit in March 2000. Agricultural investigators were transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Natural Resources. Inside inspectors, who work on the kill floors, and outside investigators, who track down illegal slaughter, no longer have the ongoing connections that come from working for the same Ministry

### **3. Wages: frozen wage rates, not all costs paid by OMAF**<sup>3</sup>

Contract meat inspectors are paid \$20 per hour. This wage rate has been frozen since 1993.

Contract meat inspectors do not receive any compensation for:

- **Administrative work done at home.** They are required to log in daily, check their schedule, and complete paper work for OMAF.
- **Travel.** All vehicle costs are paid for individually. Some inspectors travel 500 to 700 kms weekly.
- **Travel time.** Time spent traveling between abattoirs is not paid for in some cases. In some areas, the area manager will cover costs only if travel is more than 1.5 hours one-way.
- **Administrative materials.** In some cases, pens, paper, envelopes required to do their job are not supplied.
- **Laundry.** In some cases, during late 2002 and early 2003, contract inspectors were told by OMAF to pay the laundry costs of their work uniforms. Some turned to washing their blood-soaked laundry in their home washing machines.
- **Overtime.** No overtime is paid to contract inspectors. Contract inspectors are only paid for hours scheduled by the Ministry. Contract inspectors are not covered by the overtime provisions of the *Employment Standards Act*.

There is wide variation among OMAF regions in the treatment of contract inspectors. OMAF area managers apply the rules differently. Some areas or some individual inspectors are paid for some costs, such as travel, and others are not. The older, more experienced inspectors have started negotiating individually with their area managers to get the best possible deal for themselves.

---

<sup>2</sup> George Morris Centre, Allocation of Meat Inspection Resources in Ontario January 1998 p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Data on wages and costs collected in March and April 2003.

#### **4. Experience and Turnover**

Based upon OMAF data, the 22 contract inspectors who left meat inspection (quit, terminated, retired) during 2001 (number = 22) worked an average of 11 months. In 2002, the contract inspectors who left the system (n = 20) worked an average of 20 months. In 2003, the contract inspectors who left the system (n = 27 since January 2003) worked an average of 31 months. This indicates that in 2003 the inspectors who left had greater experience and longer continuous service. On a kill floor, experience matters. An experienced inspector has the eyes, ears, and nose to catch violations.

##### **Q. When did you start working as a contract meat inspector?**

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Prior to 1997:                  | 30% |
| Between 1997 and 1999:          | 13% |
| More than 3 years' experience:  | 11% |
| 2 to 3 years' experience:       | 9%  |
| 1 to 2 years' experience:       | 20% |
| Less than 1 year of experience: | 11% |

##### **Q. What experience did you have in the food industry or related work before you started working as a meat inspector?**

Seventy-two (72) per cent of respondents have prior experience in the food industry.

Contract inspectors' are former federal system (CFIA) inspectors who were laid off or retired and now work in the provincial system, former butchers and meat cutters, former abattoir workers, quality control workers in food plants, animal lab workers, vets whose training is not recognized in Canada, former fast food restaurant workers, and farmers.

Twenty-two (22) per cent said they have no prior food industry experience.

##### **Q. In your area, do you know of other contract meat inspectors who have quit in the past year?**

Seventy-two (72) per cent of respondents said yes.

Nine (9) per cent said no.

Nineteen (19) per cent did not know or did not answer.

##### **Q. Why do you think they quit?**

When asked why the inspectors quit, the respondents who commented replied:

- due to poor pay and travel costs not covered;
- moved to federal system with benefits and better money;
- because hours were irregular, no benefits;

- not getting any hours;
- no vacation pay, no travel pay;
- no hours or not enough hours;
- they left for a job with better and more regular hours;
- better working conditions and benefits at the new job;
- no support from management on issues;
- retired;
- not making a living;
- better security in new job;
- found better jobs;
- terminated by OMAF;
- not going to waste their future doing meat inspection;
- not suited to do it;
- too much bullshit.

**Q. Is the staff turnover of contract meat inspectors an issue for you?**

Eighty (80) per cent of respondents said yes.

Thirteen (13) per cent said no.

Seven (7) per cent did not know

Explanations included:

- The inexperience of meat inspectors in plants allows for sub-standard products to reach the public
- Yes, there is a lack of training for new inspectors. They don't get enough training before they are sent out by themselves. They are hiring people with no experience.
- There are too many new faces.
- Too little knowledge and pushed into field.
- Creates low morale.
- Retraining not done and budget spent on training rookies.
- Makes all of us look stupid.
- Not enough training, thrown into field and its risky.
- If the consumers knew about the lack of experience it is alarming.
- Current meat inspectors are expected to be training new inspectors and it's too much.
- Too many operators are complaining about the lack of knowledge in the new staff.
- OMAF is hiring people with no experience.
- Too many good inspectors with experience are leaving.
- I'm new and the situation isn't getting better.
- If OMAF spends all that time in training new hires, yet will not spend money on staff retention, what is the point?
- It creates an unstable workforce.
- Major concern – food safety is at risk due to their incompetence.
- Inexperienced people are not doing the job and owners/operators don't like it.
- Cleaning up the messes left by inexperienced and untrained workers and covering for their incompetence.

## **5. Hours of work and working conditions**

### **Q. How many plants are you assigned to?**

0 = 2%  
1 = 11%  
2-3 = 37%  
4-5 = 37%  
more than 5 = 13%

### **Q. Is this your regular assignment?**

For 87 per cent of respondents this was their regular assignment.

### **Q. How many hours did you work in the past week?**

0 hours this week: 2%  
Less than 14 hours: 4%  
14 to 24 hours: 9%  
24 to 34 hours: 9%  
35 to 39 hours: 17%  
40 to 49 hours: 40%  
More than 50 hours: 20%

For 76 per cent of the respondents this was their regular schedule

For 17 per cent this is not a regular schedule. Half reported that they work longer hours and the other half reported they work seasonal hours (i.e., it is busy in summer and fall, slow in the winter). Some prefer to work part-time hours.

### **Q. How many hours of “further processing” inspection do you do in a day?<sup>4</sup>**

0 = 24%  
Less than 1 hours = 26%  
1-2 hours = 26%  
3-4 hours = 22%

### **Q. OMAF has commented recently that inspection hours have increased since 1995. Do you agree with that statement?**

Fifty-nine (59) per cent agreed with the statement.

Fifteen (15) per cent disagreed.

Twenty-six (26) per cent did not answer or did not know.

---

<sup>4</sup> “Further processing” refers to inspection of non-slaughter operations in abattoirs, e.g., sausage-making.

Reasons given were:

- further processing (inspection of sausage, fermented meat products, etc. in provincially inspected abattoirs) and sampling, especially in the first part of this fiscal year.
- Further processing Levels II and III were identified as the areas where increased inspection hours were allocated.
- Further processing levels II and III were cut by 50 per cent in July 2003.
- Hours have increased because new programs have been added.

**Q. Do you feel that there are enough hours allocated to inspection of abattoirs in your area?**

Fifty-nine (59) per cent of respondents said no.

Thirty-three (33) per cent said yes.

Eleven (11) per cent said they did not know or had no response.

Issues raised included the lack of preparation time. Inspectors get paid for slaughter hours assigned to the plant. They are not paid for time before or after slaughter for any administrative work or related tasks. Inspectors identified the need for more random or spot inspections, especially during off hours. Expanding inspections of free-standing further processing plants was also identified as a priority.

**Q. Have you been assigned to inspect a plant either on weekends or after hours?**

Fifty (50) per cent of respondents said yes.

Thirty-seven (37) per cent respondents said no.

Thirteen (13) per cent did not respond.

## **6. Training**

**Q. What training did you receive from OMAF when you were hired as a meat inspector?**

The typical training program is in-plant 8 to 16 weeks' training with another inspector, after which an inspector may be assigned to an abattoir on his or her own. OMAF now offers a two-to-four-week course. This basic training is required, but during the past three years, it has not been provided consistently.

Fifteen (15) per cent responded with less than 8 weeks training

Forty-three (43) said 8-12 weeks of training.

**Q. Have you received additional training from OMAF since being hired as a meat inspector?**

Training opportunities are extremely limited. For example, BSE training was offered in 2001, followed by a refresher in 2003. Several inspectors hired between 2001 and 2003 had no BSE training.

**Q. What additional training would you like to have?**

The list included:

- further processing training, especially levels II and III;
- computer training;
- beef grading;
- BSE training;
- training on documentation for hearings;
- pathology courses and refresher courses on the science related to meat inspection;
- “whatever is offered” – they just want training.

Several respondents commented that the training provided to federal inspectors is far superior to that offered to provincial inspectors.

## **7. Health and Safety**

**Q. Do you have concerns about your health and safety when working as a meat inspector?**

Fifty-seven (57) per cent of respondents said yes.

Forty-one (41) per cent of respondents said no.

Two (2) per cent did not answer or did not know.

Respondents provide several comments.

One cluster of comments included:

- Inspectors fear the conduct of the abattoir workers or the owner and that it has been difficult and uncomfortable in plants.
- Some owners are very hostile and abusive.
- In some plants, the abattoir workers are using drugs and alcohol.
- Several women commented that they are the only women on the kill floor and face sexual harassment.

A second cluster included:

- No benefits, no sick pay and no injury pay.
- They have to work when sick.

- Physical well-being.
- Fear for my own health.

The third cluster related concerns about biological and physical safety:

- Biological and zoonotic diseases were identified by some as their main concern.
- Physical hazards, poor air quality and lighting.
- Being overtired and too much driving between abattoirs makes it dangerous.
- Plant conditions

## **8. Intimidation**

**Q. Do you have concerns that your hours could be cut back by your area manager?  
If yes, why? Please list**

Seventy-four (74) per cent of respondents said yes.

Twenty (20) per cent of respondents said no.

Six (6) per cent did not respond.

Comments included:

- “I have no power, there is nothing I can do about it if my hours are cut.”
- Inspectors have no guarantee of hours. Further processing inspection was cut by 50 per cent in July 2003.
- Yes – if you refuse shifts then your hours are cut.
- If you perform poorly then your hours are cut. “If cut back any further I will quit.”
- “At any moment and any time.”
- Several commented that their hours have already have been cut back.
- The area manager “acts like the Godfather.”
- Several commented that if the area manager doesn’t like you then your hours are cut
- If you screw up at all, then your hours are cut. If you slip up, even once, then you are gone or your hours are cut.
- If you upset the area manager, or don’t do as you are asked, then your hours are cut
- The area managers has the power to do it.
- If you are outspoken, then there are repercussions.
- Several were concerned that there may not be enough work and that area plants may be closing.
- Others commented that they had been kicked out of plants by the owner and nothing was done by OMAF and then found their hours cut.
- When you speak your mind or give your opinion and buck their system.
- If I don’t accept assignments and for speaking my mind.
- Speaking my mind.
- Being involved in the inspectors’ group.

A few respondents commented that they were not concerned about their hours being cut because of the shortage of inspection staff.

**Q. Have you felt intimidated by a plant manger or owner to “look the other way” or not report an incident to OMAF?**

Forty (40) per cent of respondents said yes

Fifty (50) per cent said no.

Ten (10) per cent did not respond.

Comments were:

- “You don’t give in if you value your job – you hold your ground.”
- “Yes, when I worked at Aylmer.”
- “Alymer.”
- “He’s not really intimidating, but the owner always suggest not to bother with a concern I have.”
- “After 25 years of this work, yes.”
- “Several times in several plants in the past years.”
- “Yes, intimidated because of my decisions.”

**Q. Have you reported incidents to your area manager or other manager in the branch?**

Seventy-two (72) per cent of respondents said yes

Twenty-two (22) per cent of respondents said no.

Six (6) per cent did not respond.

**Q. If yes, what were the results? For example, do you believe that the necessary and appropriate action was taken?**

Thirty (30) per cent of respondents thought that the appropriate action was taken.

Forty-eight (48) per cent said no – the necessary and appropriate action was not taken.

Twenty-two (22) per cent did not respond.

Incidents could include illegal activity, violations of the *Meat Inspection Act*, or harassment.

**Comments as part of the response to this question were:**

- There were no results, excuses given by OMAF and they were not even following their own rules and regulations.
- Follow-up was sufficient in my case.
- Yes, in writing, but not every time was appropriate action taken.
- No feedback from management.
- Little penalty was assessed.
- Nothing done
- “Fluffed off”

- Nothing was done.
- Swept under the carpet.
- Told by management to “make it work.”
- Nothing done in two cases.
- Nothing done – yet there was damage to my car.
- No reply from management.
- No action taken.
- Satisfactory action was taken.
- Satisfactory – there were no serious issues.
- Don’t know – they did not get back to the inspector.
- Most times.
- Sometimes I don’t get a reply, so I don’t rely on them.
- Nothing was done.
- Nothing or OMAF said let it go.

**Q. Have you felt intimidated by OMAF management to “look the other way” or not report an incident?**

Twenty-four (24) per cent said yes.  
 Sixty-three (63) per cent said no.  
 Eleven (11) per cent did not answer

There were some comments made as part of the response:

- Yes, by senior management.
- Yes, by Tom Baker.
- Yes – I have no trust in them.
- Yes – especially on WSIB issues.

**9. Enforcement powers: a toothless tiger**

In December 2001, the Tory government introduced the *Food Safety and Quality Act*. The *Act* and its regulations are not fully proclaimed. Meat Inspectors continue to enforce the *Meat Inspection Act* and other related Acts. Contract inspectors have been waiting for the new regulations since the act passed in 2001. OMAF has told inspectors not to use the Food Safety and Quality Act. They still wait for training on the new Act.

**Q. Do you have any concerns about the enforcement of the *Meat Inspection Act* and the other Acts we are responsible for?**

60% responded that they have concerns.  
 30% said they do not have concerns.  
 10% did not answer.

Comments were:

- We don't have enough power.
- The Act is all bark with no bite.
- No power.
- No backup.
- The Act is too open to interpretation.
- No power to enforce, no support.
- No powers.
- No backup.
- Same rules not used in all plants.
- No enforcement – just talk.
- No action.
- No back-up.
- No action.
- Consistency is a problem.
- Yes- don't know the limits (note: this is an inspector who started in 2002).
- Concerned about illegal slaughter.
- No back-up.
- Worthless piece of paper without backup.
- Aylmer issue.
- We could have more backing because when push comes to shove we end up on the short end.
- I have read audits and items not completed one year are still not enforced after one year.
- Yes, because of the insufficient training and the high staff turnover.
- Yes, they are not consistent and area managers are incompetent and not involved enough.
- OMAF won't back us up.
- It's not consistent.

## **10. Action by the Minister**

Q. The Minister of Agriculture and Food, Helen Johns states that “we are serious about enforcement – in a situation such as this (Aylmer Meat Packers Inc.). When uninspected meat may have been processed for retail sale, we take decisive action.” Do you agree with this statement?

Twenty-four (24) per cent agreed with the statement.  
Sixty-three (63) per cent did not agree with the statement.  
Thirteen (13) per cent did not respond.

Respondents comments were:

- No, its not just Aylmer.
- No, it was not dealt with swiftly.

- Should have responded to earlier complaints.
- I previously worked at Aylmer, no, they didn't react quickly enough.
- No action.
- No action by OMAF at Aylmer.
- Where have they been for the past 15 years?
- No Action.
- No action taken.
- No action taken.
- No – still have made no decisions.  
No action taken.
- No action taken.
- Not decisive at all.
- Not fast enough response.
- The whole situation is a joke, no action.
- With management of Aylmer meats packers and previous charges, why are they still in business?
- No, more can be done.
- Worried that I will incriminate myself.
- They are no consistent in enforcing the regulation.
- No! It depends who you are and who you know.