

Behind Closed Doors

What XL Foods and Horse Slaughter Plants Have in Common and What They'd Prefer to Keep Hidden

Introduction

The E-coli scandal and massive beef recall from XL Foods in Alberta has dominated Canadian news since the first cases of infection were reported in September 2012. An example is this CBC News Report from October 10th, [Better ways to monitor Canada's meat industry Canada's meat inspection system under the microscope](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/10/09/f-meat-inspection.html) (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/10/09/f-meat-inspection.html>). Canadians were disturbed by the fact that it took three weeks for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) to mobilize and shut down the slaughter plant after initial samples taken there tested positive for E-coli on September 4th. Macleans.ca reported on September 30th that [XL Foods beef recall expanded, Premier Redford Defends Alberta beef](http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/09/30/xl-foods-beef-recall-expanded-premier-redford-defends-alberta-beef/) (<http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/09/30/xl-foods-beef-recall-expanded-premier-redford-defends-alberta-beef/>). During the subsequent crisis period, startling facts began to emerge about practices at XL Foods that violate Canada's food safety regulations, starting with the staggering fact that **4,500 cattle are normally slaughtered on a daily basis at XL Foods, and that one-third of the beef that Canadians eat likely comes from XL Foods**, as reported in this [HuffPost Alberta post](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/09/29/beef-recall-canada_n_1925646.html) (http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/09/29/beef-recall-canada_n_1925646.html). For a facility to push thousands of animals through the slaughter line every day, it is no wonder that regulations and food safety measures become broken.

In this Calgary Herald video report, [Union calls for better training, slower pace at XL Foods](http://www.calgaryherald.com/health/Union+calls+better+training+slower+pace+Foods+with+video/7370332/story.html#ixzz29HRul2o6) (<http://www.calgaryherald.com/health/Union+calls+better+training+slower+pace+Foods+with+video/7370332/story.html#ixzz29HRul2o6>), union officials speak to the priority of quantity, not quality; quicker production, not food safety. Doug O'Halloran, President of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 401, says **the speed of the processing line at the XL Foods plant in Brooks is too fast**. Between 300 and 320 carcasses go by workers on the line every hour. That leaves only two to three seconds to slice the meat and has resulted in less time in which to make sure equipment and meat is clean.

It is inconceivable that the agency in charge of overseeing food production at slaughter facilities insists that it had acted responsibly and that Canada continues to produce healthy, safe food. According to Bob Kingston, Agriculture Union National President in this October 2nd [Food Safety First Briefing to Senate Committee on Food Safety](http://www.foodsafetyfirst.ca/2012/10/02/briefing-to-senate-committee-on-food-safety/) (<http://www.foodsafetyfirst.ca/2012/10/02/briefing-to-senate-committee-on-food-safety/>), **"This is yet another example of industry self-policing gone wrong because the CFIA is not adequately resourced to verify compliance."** The plant employs over 2,000 workers. According to the CFIA, <http://www.inspection.gc.ca/food/consumer-centre/food-safety-investigations/xl-foods/questions-and-answers/investigation/eng/1349569721692/1349569811033>, "there are currently 40 CFIA inspectors and 6 veterinarians assigned full-time to the XL Foods plant providing systematic inspection and oversight. They work in two shifts to ensure full coverage whenever the plant is operating". **Where was the oversight that should have caught food safety violations at XL Foods in the first place?**

CHDC Reports on Food Safety Concerns at Canada's Horse Slaughter Plants

The Canadian Horse Defence Coalition (CHDC) asks where was the oversight with respect to the slaughtering of horses for human consumption? Time and time again, the CFIA has failed in its

management of this industry, so the XL Foods recall comes as no surprise. Four separate undercover operations: www.defendhorsescanada.org, (click on “Investigations”) have revealed that both animal welfare and food safety are compromised in Canada’s equine slaughter plants. Following each investigation, the CFIA stated that they were initiating changes. But why did they wait until independent cameras recorded and picked up on violations? **Only when the evidence was made public in CHDC reports did the agency initiate changes and improvements.**

We are about to show you a series of graphic images, some of which are being released to the public for the first time.

In this article published on October 2nd by the Toronto Star, [Food inspection agency adds more meat to growing recall of XL Foods product](http://www.thestar.com/business/article/1265789--food-inspection-agency-adds-more-meat-to-growing-recall-of-xl-foods-product) (<http://www.thestar.com/business/article/1265789--food-inspection-agency-adds-more-meat-to-growing-recall-of-xl-foods-product>), Richard Arsenault, CFIA Director Meat Programs Division, states that “...dirt is washed off animals as they move into the plant. Once they’re killed, the hide is stripped off, and any visible dirt is cut off the carcass, not rinsed. Once the carcass has been cut into pieces, inspectors take meat samples for bacterial testing. That was working reasonably well.”

The CHDC has reviewed close to 100 hours of horse slaughter footage from four separate plants in Canada and the amount of dirt visible on horses in the stun box leads us to believe that no effort has been made to wash these animals prior to stunning.



Mule in knock box at Les Viandes de la Petite-Nation in July 2011 – dirt on neck and foreign substance below the slaughter tag.



Also at Les Viandes de la Petite-Nation, July 2011 – horse with badly infected eye about to be killed.



Horses in a Bouvry Exports feedlot in 2011 near Calgary, Alberta. The black horse is lying down on mounded manure, and nearby horses have caked manure on their coats. Horses being warehoused in feedlots before slaughter are typically kept in these types of filthy conditions. Feedlots are not cleared out and are normally full of urine and feces.



Another Alberta feedlot overrun by manure, urine and mud. Horses go straight to slaughter from these bio-hazardous lots.



Manure is mounded, not removed.



Dead horse at a Bouvry owned feedlot in 2012. These casualties can be left for days before removal.
What possible condition killed this seemingly healthy horse?



It is unknown how these horses died, but in summer 2011 they were photographed at the Bouvry Exports plant in Fort MacLeod, Alberta, which slaughters over 200 horses per day. The presence of a heavy maggot infestation on the horse in the left-hand photo indicates that the carcass had been left in this location for some time, perhaps days. The horse on the right was bloated and oozing blood from the head and rear extremities, causing a further bio-security hazard at the plant. This is a very serious public health concern.



Again in summer 2011 at the Bouvry Exports plant, dead horses are left on the ground bloated and in full rigor mortis. Maggots cover the hind end and lower body of this horse, and bodily fluids have leaked onto the ground.

In the above mentioned Toronto Star article, Dr. Arsenault states that the system was working *reasonably well*. The same has been claimed by the CFIA with regard to their oversight of Canadian horse slaughter plants. The CHDC believes these pictures tell a different story and reveal an alarming reality.

Working Conditions and Staff Expertise

Immigrant workers are typically hired for low-paying positions that are difficult to fill with the local workforce, as evidenced in this May 2012 Albertaviews article, [Cut to the Bone](http://www.albertaviews.ab.ca/2012/04/26/cut-to-the-bone/) (<http://www.albertaviews.ab.ca/2012/04/26/cut-to-the-bone/>). Worker stress can be severe, and turnover of staff is high. Line speeds are another significant problem. XL Foods slaughters over 4,000 cattle a day. In the CHDC report [Pasture to Plate](http://defendhorsescanada.org/investigations/pasture-to-plate) (<http://defendhorsescanada.org/investigations/pasture-to-plate>), it was noted that the average time between a horse's entry into the kill box and being sent on to the bleed-out room was less than three minutes.

On October 17, 2012, a [revealing letter to the editor](http://www.timescolonist.com/Work+gruelling+slaughterhouse/7402200/story.html) (<http://www.timescolonist.com/Work+gruelling+slaughterhouse/7402200/story.html>) of B.C.'s Times Colonist paper was published from a former worker at the Lakeside Packers plant (before it was acquired by XL Foods). Although this man worked at Lakeside/XL Foods in 1997, he says, "the line speed was so fast, you couldn't stop for a second". He goes on to say, "I was told the line speeds are twice what they were in the 1960s and the pay has halved."

Assembly-line conditions, where speed and quotas are priority, create an unending list of concerns. **First and foremost, they ensure that animals cannot be humanely killed.**

These conditions also compromise worker safety, as seen in the CHDC report, [Chambers of Carnage](http://defendhorsescanada.org/investigations/chambers-of-carnage) (<http://defendhorsescanada.org/investigations/chambers-of-carnage>), where a horse was not properly stunned, was let through to the bleed-out room, and was suspended by a hind leg where she revived and started to thrash from the chain suspending her. A worker came close to investigate and was kicked forcibly in the stomach by the reviving mare.



Here, the mare is shown being shot for the second time after kicking a worker. This horse endured several minutes of conscious suffering before her life was finally ended.



This photo shows the worker who was kicked. Note the filthy conditions near the ceiling right above the knock box and bleed out room.

Unhealthy Conditions in Horse Slaughter Plants



Storage room at Les Viandes de la Petite-Nation in July 2011 where horse hides are salted and stacked. Note the cigarette butts and general filthy conditions on the floor.



Open metal and plastic bins of horse hearts and livers in refrigerated room at Bouvry Exports - summer 2011. Note the pools of blood on the floor in this room. Copious amounts of fluid underfoot can create slippery conditions for workers and can be tracked from area to area, increasing the risk of pathogen spread. Canada has a market for vital organs, or “offal” for countries including Belgium, France and Switzerland: http://www.agr.gc.ca/redmeat/rpt/11tbl39_eng.htm.

In the 2010 Nicholas Dodman, Nicholas Blondeau and Ann M. Marini report [Food and Chemical Toxicology - Association of phenylbutazone usage with horses bought for slaughter: A public health risk](http://www.horseprotection.it/docs/phenylbutazone.pdf) (<http://www.horseprotection.it/docs/phenylbutazone.pdf>) it states that “Tissue levels of phenylbutazone (PBZ) and oxyphenbutazone were highest in kidney. In one study, high levels were also found in liver, lung and heart whereas the lowest levels were found in muscle (gluteus and biceps) and tendon (Lees et al., 1987). Since the elimination of PBZ follows exponential decay, traces of PBZ will remain as a contaminant of horsemeat in previously treated horses for a very long and as yet undetermined period of time.”

This Irish Veterinary Journal brochure, [Phenylbutazone and its availability in Ireland](http://www.veterinaryirelandjournal.com/Links/PDFs/CE-Large/CELA_Dec_2010.pdf.pdf) (http://www.veterinaryirelandjournal.com/Links/PDFs/CE-Large/CELA_Dec_2010.pdf.pdf) sets out in very plain terms the risks of consuming horsemeat and that the passport of each and every horse who ever received phenylbutazone would be clearly marked as not intended for human consumption.



Horse hearts left in the open overnight in refrigerated room at Bouvry Exports – summer 2011. They appear to be drying out, particularly on the bottom left of this picture.



Fresh horse carcasses hanging in refrigeration room at Bouvry Exports. Notice the overturned cart on the left, lying on its side.



Horse remains left out in the open in a bloody container at Bouvry Exports – December 2010.



A worker goes about his business next to overflowing horse remains at Bouvry Exports – December 2010. One has to wonder if summertime conditions are the same where flying insects could cause cross contamination.



Down horse in holding pen inside Les Viandes de la Petite-Nation in July 2011. Notice the urine and manure stains on the horse, and the dirty conditions on the wooden blue door jamb behind.



Thin and emaciated horses in holding pen inside Les Viandes de la Petite-Nation in July 2011. The “down” horse is to left of the Paint. On any typical night, horses are kept in tight conditions such as this, and go straight to the kill line the following day. By the morning, manure and urine will have accumulated on the floor around them.

XL Foods Update – October 20, 2012

In a further blow to XL Foods and the tainted meat scandal, on October 18th the Ottawa Citizen reported that [U.S. authorities repeatedly warned CFIA over safety problems at XL Foods facilities](http://www.ottawacitizen.com/health/authorities+repeatedly+warned+CFIA+over+safety+problems+Foods/7405937/story.html) (<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/health/authorities+repeatedly+warned+CFIA+over+safety+problems+Foods/7405937/story.html>). Long before E-coli contamination was discovered in XL Foods Inc. products, U.S. authorities repeatedly warned the CFIA about safety problems at the Alberta meat packer. Inspectors with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) sent a series of audit reports to the CFIA between 2003 and 2008 detailing deficiencies they had found at Canadian processing plants, including XL Foods facilities. The article goes on to describe systemic deficiencies at the plant that have shocked Canadian meat consumers. **The list of deficiencies is disturbingly familiar to the conditions inside Canada's horse slaughter plants.** In the same fashion as the CFIA has responded to the CHDC's history of concerns for horse slaughter plants, the government agency overseeing both food and animal safety dismisses the findings brought forward.

In a surprising move on October 17th, it was announced that JBS USA, a subsidiary of Brazil-based JBS S.A., has reached an agreement with Edmonton-based XL Foods to take over management of the Canadian company's Lakeside slaughterhouse in Brooks, Alberta. The biggest shareholders of JBS S.A. are its founding family and the Brazilian government. Its U.S. arm will run the Canadian plant. JBS USA also has been given the exclusive option to buy the troubled plant and several other XL properties.

In this October 20th CBC News story, *House essay: [Nothing 'silly' about tainted beef](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/10/20/pol-the-house-essay-nothing-silly-about-tainted-beef.html)*, (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/10/20/pol-the-house-essay-nothing-silly-about-tainted-beef.html>), it's revealed that JBS, the largest animal protein producer in the world, has a history of E-coli scandals – 23 people got sick in the U.S. in 2009, and the company recalled 170,000 kilograms of beef.

As well, this October 20th Edmonton Journal article, [Company taking over XL Foods being sued over alleged racial and religious harassment](http://www.edmontonjournal.com/news/alberta/Company+taking+over+Foods+being+sued+over+alleged+racial/7421838/story.html) (<http://www.edmontonjournal.com/news/alberta/Company+taking+over+Foods+being+sued+over+alleged+racial/7421838/story.html>) provides further worrisome news on JBS USA's troubled past and current law suits.

So despite the CFIA downplaying the severity of the breakdown of food safety at XL Foods, as stated in this Huffington Post October 4th article, [Ritz speaks on food safety](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/10/04/ritz-speaks-on-food-safety_n_1938645.html), (http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/10/04/ritz-speaks-on-food-safety_n_1938645.html), where MP Ted Menzies accused the opposition of trying to scare Canadians "about a food system that has some minor problems", the plant remains shut down, and now will be taken over by foreign interests. The breakdown may not be apparent to the CFIA, but it is to the rest of Canada.

Conclusion

Clearly, Canada's slaughterhouses have a multitude of health, safety and humane violations to hide. It is no wonder that illness can result from meat consumption when production lines, relying on low-paid, unskilled staff, push animals through at excessive speeds. CFIA oversight in slaughter facilities is minimal, as evidenced by the lack of inspectors seen in the four CHDC investigative reports. The agency continues to echo denial, stating that Canada's food supply is safe. Perhaps CFIA spokespeople function on the premise that if they repeat a statement often enough, it will soon be imprinted upon the minds

of the public, and will be believed. The cautious consumer, however, will realize that there is much to fear from what happens behind the closed doors of Canadian slaughter plants.

What Next? Here's How to Help End Horse Slaughter in Canada

Do you agree that the CFIA should concentrate on cleaning house and address food safety concerns in Canada's livestock slaughter plants? Do you agree that the CFIA is struggling already with overseeing food safety and traditional livestock slaughter plants, and should end horse slaughter all together? Do you agree that horses cannot be humanely slaughtered in an assembly-line situation? Do you agree the risks are too high for Canada to ship potentially tainted horsemeat to overseas consumers, since most North American horses are not purpose raised for slaughter, and many horses are treated with phenylbutazone, the horse world's most common pain killer?

Bill C-322 is Canada's horse anti-slaughter bill. To show your support for the bill and to make your statement to Canadian Parliament, go to the CHDC's [Do It Now](http://defendhorsescanada.org/help-now/do-it-now) page (<http://defendhorsescanada.org/help-now/do-it-now>) for petitions, flyers and who to contact at the CFIA, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada to make your voice heard!

For the Horses,
Canadian Horse Defence Coalition
www.defendhorsescanada.org