



Canadian Food  
Inspection Agency

Agence canadienne  
d'inspection des aliments

# **Public Opinion Research with Canadians on Food Fraud: 2021-2022**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Canadian Food Inspection Agency**

March 2022

**Prepared for:**

Canadian Food Inspection Agency  
Supplier name: Quorus Consulting Group Inc.  
Contract award date: November 18, 2021  
Delivery date: March 2022  
Contract amount (incl. HST): \$112,854.44  
Contract number: 39903-220784/001/CY  
Public opinion research number: POR-041-21

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*Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.*

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This public opinion research report presents the results of quantitative and qualitative research conducted by Quorus Consulting Group Inc. on behalf of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency during January 2022.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Recherche sur l'opinion publique auprès des Canadiens sur la fraude alimentaire : 2021-2022 - Sommaire

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Ottawa, Ontario  
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### **Catalogue number:**

A104-200/2022E-PDF

### **International standard book number (ISBN):**

978-0-660-42589-4

### **Related publications (registration number: POR-041-21):**

Catalogue number: A104-200/2022F-PDF (final report in French)

ISBN: 978-0-660-42590-0

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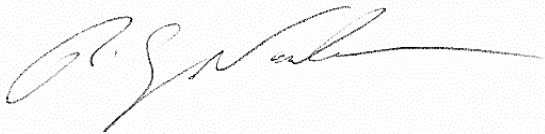


## Political neutrality certification

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Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Nadeau", is written over a light gray, textured rectangular background.

Rick Nadeau, President  
Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

## Executive Summary

### Research purpose and objectives

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is dedicated to safeguarding food, animals and plants which enhances the health and well-being of Canada's people, environment, and economy. The CFIA continually works to improve the overall health of Canadians.

Canadian law prohibits the labelling, packaging, treating, processing, selling or advertising of any food in a manner that is false, misleading or deceptive to consumers. When food is misrepresented, it can be a form of food fraud. Food fraud can mislead consumers and can also be a food safety issue (for example, when products contain undeclared allergens). The CFIA works to protect consumers from food misrepresentation by conducting inspections, analyzing food samples and taking enforcement action. Combatting food fraud is a shared responsibility between government, industry and consumers. Since food fraud is meant to deceive consumers, it is not always easy to know whether a food is fraudulent or not. Even so, consumers play an important role in identifying and tackling food fraud.

This research builds upon previous quantitative research on food safety and food fraud conducted by Quorus for the CFIA in 2019-2020. In 2022, research was expanded to conduct further quantitative and qualitative research in order to meet the CFIA's objective of collecting up-to-date opinion data from the public on a variety of topics related to the accurate representation of food.

The results of this research will be used to further inform the CFIA's communications, and policy and program efforts regarding food fraud.

The objectives of this research were as follows:

#### Quantitative

- measure Canadians' awareness and understanding of food fraud
- measure Canadians' habits and concerns about food fraud
- measure Canadians' sources of information on food fraud
- measure Canadians' perceptions about food fraud
- compare and contrast findings with previous research findings and where possible consider differences from other public opinion research

## Qualitative

- gather opinions and feelings of Canadians surrounding messaging and communications about food fraud
- better understand the thoughts and opinions of Canadians on food fraud by allowing Canadians from all different backgrounds to elaborate and fully explain their experience with or awareness of food fraud

The quantitative research consisted of an online survey with Canadians at least 18 years of age, who reflected the distribution of the Canadian population. On average, the survey took 10 minutes to complete. A total of 1,000 online surveys were completed with data collection occurring between January 20<sup>th</sup> and January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022. For this study, quotas by province were established to generate sufficient data regionally for robust analysis. Data was monitored to aim for a 50/50 gender split in each province, and to ensure that no specific age cohort was under-represented. The equivalent margin of error for a probability study of 1,000 cases would be +/- 3.1%. Data were weighted by region, gender and age to ensure that the final distributions within the final sample mirror those of the Canadian population according to the latest Census data.

The qualitative research methodology consisted of 10 online focus groups with Canadians aged 18 and older representing different regions across the country, aiming for representation across gender, employment status, education level and minority status. The focus groups were conducted online from January 24<sup>th</sup> to January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022. The groups took an average of 90 minutes. Quorus was responsible for coordinating all aspects of the research project including designing and translating the recruitment screener and the moderation guide, coordinating all aspects of participant recruitment, coordinating the online focus group platform and related logistics, moderating all sessions, and delivering required reports at the end of data collection.

## Quantitative research results

### Food fraud

**Just over one-quarter of the respondents reported being aware of food fraud.** Food fraud was defined to respondents as occurring when food is misrepresented. **Concern for food fraud was somewhat higher with 4 in 10 fairly concerned** about food fraud and just under one-quarter who were very concerned. Half of respondents saw this as a fairly important issue including one-third who rated this as a very important issue.

**Just 1 in 5 had personally encountered misrepresented food.** Of those who encountered misrepresented food or food fraud the main commodities were with processed food, meat, organic foods, and fish.

**Examples of what was considered misrepresented food included labelling issues, product issues, and specific food issues.** The main cause of food fraud was seen as a deliberate use of lower quality ingredients so that some companies may try to get an advantage over other companies. Nearly a third of Canadians felt that mistakes can happen along the food supply chain and very few felt that food fraud is a blatant attempt to mislead or take advantage of consumers.

**More than half claimed they would report an issue if they thought that a food product was fraudulent or misrepresented.** One-third of Canadians would just throw the product away.

**If a company was found guilty of misrepresenting food,** almost half of respondents felt that **imposing a fine was the appropriate enforcement action.** Canadians seem to be generally forgiving as severe penalties such as jail time and closing businesses were seen as much less acceptable.

**Almost everyone (93%) agreed that the CFIA should publish the names of companies** that have been found to have misrepresented food.

**The great majority of Canadians felt that food fraud is a health safety risk for consumers** and over three-quarters felt it is the responsibility of companies in the food industry to make sure their products are not misrepresented. One-third felt regulators heavily punish companies caught misrepresenting food.

**The federal government was seen by over two-thirds of Canadians as the main source of information about food fraud** or potential food fraud. Industry associations would be the choice for one-quarter of Canadians, followed by the companies in the supply chain (food retailers, food manufacturers, and food distributors).

**Canadians preferred to interact with the Government of Canada** via digital channels (either through a website, social media or email) when searching for information about food fraud or potential food fraud.

**Most Canadians indicated they were likely to encounter food fraud with products imported from other countries to Canada,** while food products made in Canada were least likely to be seen as misrepresented.

**Canadians were confident in the ability of the Government of Canada to manage food fraud.** They also felt the government is the most responsible for this issue (39%). Over a quarter felt that food manufacturers are the most responsible for managing food fraud (26%).

## Labelling

**There was a high level of confidence in the truthfulness of product labels.** Canadians were most confident in obvious product identifiers such as, what the food is, the amount of food in the package, and the best-before date. The least amount of confidence was shown in labels making health or organic claims.

**Food labelling claims were fairly important for half of Canadians in their food purchasing decisions.** While Canadians felt the responsibilities for food labelling claims lie with regulators and manufacturers, very few take precautions to ensure they purchase food with food labelling claims that are well understood and truthful. Almost half take no precautions at all, and one-quarter could not name any precautions they take.

## Qualitative research results

### General discussion

#### Discussion of food fraud

Familiarity with the term “food fraud” is moderate, with most participants indicating they had not heard the term before. However, when challenged to venture a guess, many gave appropriate examples that boiled down to the idea of something not being accurate or being omitted on a food product’s label.

While the term “misrepresentation” was regularly used by participants in the initial discussion to explain what they thought food fraud is, upon further probing, it was often seen as something slightly different – less serious - than food fraud.

Packaged foods (with more ingredients and health claims), products from certain countries, as well as “unhealthy” foods were generally perceived to be more susceptible to food fraud than fresh fruits and vegetables.

#### Food fraud in Canada

Awareness of actual instances of food fraud in Canada was also quite low. In most groups, only 1 or 2 participants had heard of a particular incidence of food fraud. No one had personally encountered food fraud or bought a product they later learned was fraudulent.

Information about food fraud generally came from (unspecified) media sources or documentaries. It was not a topic that was proactively researched: only a few participants who had read or seen something on the topic said they followed up with more online research.

Level of concern about food fraud in day-to-day life and shopping behaviour was low to medium. There is a solid sense of trust in the brands they buy and the stores they shop at.



Hypothetically speaking, if they were to encounter food fraud, some would take action – but many would not. The action they described taking, if any, was often derived from what they typically do if they bought something that was bad or spoiled before the best-before date. For most, the action was passive rather than very active.

Knowledge about how food fraud is managed and regulated in Canada is very limited, with awareness of the CFIA as the regulator being quite low. However, many assume that the CFIA is doing a good job, as “no news is good news.”

### Online advertising testing

Visual and GIF concepts can be found in the Moderation Guide located in the Appendices.

#### **Feedback on visual Concept 1**

Concept 1 received less than enthusiastic feedback from most participants. While the main message to “stop food fraud” was clear, it lacked clarity of exactly what food fraud was and how exactly consumers could be expected to stop it.

Elements receiving positive feedback were the inclusion of the full food cart with a variety of foods in the image (which helped to understand the grocery retail context), the obvious message on the stop sign, the Government of Canada wordmark (which made it clearly a federal government ad) and the eye-catching colours used.

Elements receiving criticism were the lack of a clear call to action, the lack of basic information about food fraud, the simplistic design and execution, and the absence of a URL and a tagline.

#### **Feedback on visual Concept 2**

Concept 2 was not very well received. While again, the main message to “stop food fraud” was clear, this concept was not something that would peak many participants’ interest. As it contained only 1 of the 2 key elements seen in Concept 1 (the stop sign), it lacked the context of the grocery retail environment.

Elements receiving positive feedback were the obvious message on the stop sign, the Government of Canada wordmark and the eye-catching red colour used.

Elements receiving criticism were again the lack of a clear call to action, the lack of basic information about food fraud, the overly simplistic or amateurish design and execution, and the absence of a URL and a tagline.

### **Feedback on visual Concept 3**

Concept 3 received lukewarm feedback overall. The main message from the visual concept was derived from the question mark on the grocery bag, making participants think about their food or groceries – and potentially wanting to find out more.

Elements receiving positive feedback were the colour blue used, the question mark, the clear call to action and the Government of Canada wordmark.

Elements receiving criticism were again the overly simplistic or amateurish design and execution, and the absence of a URL and a tagline. The fact that only fresh fruits and vegetables were shown also often received negative feedback.

### **Preferred visual concept**

Concept 1 and Concept 3 were virtually tied for the best concept, with barely anyone choosing Concept 2. Among the younger cohort (18-34), Concept 1 held a slight edge, while among the older cohort (35+), Concept 1 and 3 were in dead heat. However, there were clearly common missing elements, as described above, that made neither of the “winning” concepts highly effective.

### **Feedback on GIF concept**

The GIF was generally well received.

Elements receiving positive feedback were the movement and use of bright colours, which were said to grab people’s attention, the clear call to action, the cross-section of food in the grocery cart, the URL, the messages that set expectations about website content and the Government of Canada wordmark.

Elements receiving criticism were that the scenes moved too fast and that it does not compel the viewer to take action.

### **Feedback on messaging**

The most popular message was A, followed by messages B and C in a tie for second. Among the younger cohort (18-34), message A was by far the most preferred with B and C barely gaining any traction, whereas among participants 35 and older, there was a more even split between preferences for A, B or C.

The key strength of message A was that it made participants think and question something that they may have not thought about in the past. On the other hand, those who liked messages B or

C were likely to point to the fact that they wanted to learn what they could do to help out – either how to report food fraud (message B) or how to help the government prevent it (message C).

However, as was seen when discussing the static images, the general feedback for all 3 messages was that there should be more information – either a longer tag line, more text (such as combining messages A and B, for example), and a URL.

### **Qualitative research disclaimer**

*Qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively projectable measures. The purpose is not to generate “statistics” but to hear the full range of opinions on a topic, understand the language participants use, gauge degrees of passion and engagement and to leverage the power of the group to inspire ideas. Participants are encouraged to voice their opinions, irrespective of whether or not that view is shared by others.*

*Due to the sample size, the special recruitment methods used, and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work under discussion is exploratory in nature. The findings are not, nor were they intended to be, projectable to a larger population.*

*Specifically, it is inappropriate to suggest or to infer that few (or many) real world users would behave in one way simply because few (or many) participants behaved in this way during the sessions. This kind of projection can only be made based on quantitative research.*

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