

**Public Opinion Research with Food Businesses on Food Safety
Regulations: 2022-2023**

Research Report

Prepared for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency

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Canada 

Public Opinion Research with Food Businesses on Food Safety Regulations: 2022-2023

This public opinion research report presents the results of a telephone survey and focus groups conducted by Pollara Strategic Insights Inc. on behalf of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : **Recherche sur l'opinion publique auprès des entreprises alimentaires à l'appui de la conformité à la réglementation sur la salubrité des aliments : 2022-2023**

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Executive Summary

Pollara Strategic Insights (Pollara) is pleased to present this report to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) regarding qualitative and quantitative public opinion research undertaken to support food businesses' compliance with food safety regulations.

As part of the CFIA's mandate, the agency regularly interacts with Canadian food businesses. Public opinion research among decision-makers in these organizations is an effective way for the CFIA to stay connected to these businesses. Now is an especially crucial time to conduct this research, as the Canadian food business sector faced extraordinary pressures during COVID-19. The sector is evolving as a result of the pandemic, and dealing with new trends such as the growth of e-commerce.

Moreover, the Safe Food for Canadians Regulations (SFCR) have been coming into force in stages since 2018, so it is important to fully understand how these regulations are being viewed by the sector. Building off this, this research project was an opportunity to explore how the industry feels about other food safety regulations, including federal food regulations around online sales and importing, and labelling requirements (including the labelling tools and resources available to the industry from the CFIA).

This research also looked at the relationship between the CFIA and the businesses they serve, with a close focus on the Ask CFIA tool.

In the focus groups, many businesses spoke of a desire for a “partnership” between themselves and the CFIA – we hope the findings of this research will help the CFIA strengthen this partnership by better communicating with and responding to the needs of the businesses they serve.

To meet the research objectives, Pollara conducted a telephone survey of 902 Canadians who own or hold a managerial role at a business in the food sector and are responsible for regulatory compliance, and an online survey with 200 past Ask CFIA users.

The phone survey was conducted by our fieldwork subcontractor, Elemental DCI, through their centralized call-centre using their Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. Sample was drawn based on a selected list of NAICS codes provided by CFIA. Interviews were fielded between February 2 and March 16, 2023, in English and French, and took an average time of 15.3 minutes to conduct.

Sample for the online survey was drawn based on a list of previous Ask CFIA users who had provided their e-mail address to CFIA and consent to be contacted. The CFIA sent them invitations to participate in an online survey in either English or French. Pollara collected responses between February 2 and 19, 2023. The median response time for the survey was 7.0 minutes.

The qualitative phase of the research included a series of 6 online focus groups with owners and employees of Canadian food businesses, and 2 in-depth-interviews (IDI) with industry consultants, all of whom were responsible for regulatory compliance. The groups were approximately 90 minutes in length with the IDIs 45 minutes in length. All participants received an honorarium of \$350.

It is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy and public opinion research. Focus group research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions,

but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

The key findings of the qualitative and quantitative research are summarized below:

General awareness and impressions of the CFIA and CFIA services

- Four in five (80%) food businesses feel they have a very clear understanding of the food safety regulations that apply to their business, and a similar percentage (82%) are very confident they could pass a CFIA inspection. Both these figures are high in all regions, and amongst all types of businesses.
- Perceptions around CFIA transparency have improved over the past year. The percentage of businesses who feel the CFIA is very transparent at reporting non-compliance has risen from 38% to 47%, while the percentage who feel they are very transparent at assessing non-compliance with regulations has risen from 38% to 52%.
- Across the 4 focus groups, larger businesses who dealt with CFIA more tended to have more positive perceptions of them, while small businesses tended to know less about the CFIA and therefore felt less connected to them.
 - While larger businesses were more likely to see the CFIA as a “partner”, virtually every focus group participant wanted the CFIA to play more of a partnership role, and less of an enforcement role.
 - Participants generally felt the CFIA was most helpful to businesses when they are starting up. Many businesses who have been operating for years tend to assume they know all the regulations, and look to the CFIA mainly to let them know about changes to regulations.

SFCR and other regulations

- Two-thirds (66%) have seen, read, or heard of the SFCR, up 4 points from last year, but not as high as in 2021.
 - Consistent with last year, awareness of the SFCR is highest in Quebec (87%), and among larger organizations with higher revenues. Awareness of SFCR is higher among processors/manufacturers (78%) and wholesalers/distributors (76%), than among retailers (60%) and agriculture businesses (57%).

Outcome based regulations

- Most businesses have a general understanding of “outcome-based regulations”, though only 36% feel the concept is very clear.
- There is overwhelming conceptual support for outcome-based regulations (support 87% / oppose 5%). Among those with a “very clear” understanding of what outcome-based regulations are, support sits at 91%.
- Though there is widespread support for outcome-based regulations across all types of businesses, focus groups showed some underlying concerns held by smaller businesses. Primarily, some of them felt these regulations can create a competitive advantage for larger businesses who have more resources to figure out efficient ways to achieve outcomes within the regulations. They felt these regulations should be accompanied by guidance on how to meet the outcomes.
 - There was additional concern, particularly among Ontario businesses that federal outcome-based regulations wouldn’t be effective unless all federal and provincial/territorial regulatory bodies adopted them.

CFIA website and communications

- The CFIA website is the most common place information is sought from about food safety regulations. In focus groups, most participants report looking for answers on the website first, before using Ask CFIA.
 - Quebec is an exception, as businesses there lean heavily on the provincial government for information. More of them visit the MAPAQ website than the CFIA website.
- On both the survey and in focus groups, businesses were generally positive about the CFIA website. They found the content there detailed and thorough, though difficult to search through at times given the large volume of it.

Creative testing

- CFIA advertising is unlikely to generate clicks unless it references “new” regulations, as most established businesses assume they already have necessary licences.
- The term “small food business” was not a term widely used by most participants, as not everyone in this sector sees themselves as a “food” business. They felt “small business” sounded more natural.
- The Government of Canada wordmark adds legitimacy to any ad.

Ask CFIA

- In the last year, 17% of businesses contacted the CFIA through various channels for guidance on food regulatory requirements.
 - The most likely to have contacted the CFIA are businesses in Atlantic Canada, large revenue businesses, processors/manufacturers, wholesalers/distributors, and exporters. These are also the types of businesses most likely to have used Ask CFIA.
- After being told about Ask CFIA, 14% of businesses recall using it.
- Three in four businesses are very satisfied (38%) or somewhat satisfied (37%) overall with Ask CFIA, an increase in total satisfaction of 18 points from last year.
- On both the survey and in focus groups, businesses are generally satisfied with the ease of using Ask CFIA to access regulatory information. There is not widespread demand for the CFIA to introduce alternative methods of contacts.
 - However, reviews are mixed on the quality of Ask CFIA responses and negative on time of response. Many businesses complain of responses taking weeks or months, leading to widespread demands for service standards on response times. Many also complain of responses that only “copy and paste” answers from the website, rather than customizing answers to match their unique situation. As such, businesses would appreciate having more back-and-forth with the people answering Ask CFIA questions, to ensure they receive a complete response.

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I hereby certify as a representative of Pollara Strategic Insights Inc. that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. 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:

Date: March 31, 2023

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "D. Arnold". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dan Arnold, Chief Strategy officer, Pollara