

CHEESE 'We hope the worst is over, but we can't say for sure'

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The province remains on high alert, he said. "We hope the worst is over, but we can't say for sure."

Eleven brands of cheese contaminated with listeria have been recalled over the past weeks, but officials fear other cheeses may have been cross-contaminated.

To stem the bacteria's spread, the Agriculture Department launched a massive intervention last weekend. Armed with garbage bags, the province's 264 inspectors visited 300 cheese shops and pulled dozens of cheeses off the shelves.

Some cheese producers and retailers - along with the opposition Parti Québécois - have accused the government of overreacting in the aftermath of the listeriosis crisis linked to tainted Maple Leaf Foods products.

That outbreak, which killed 15 people across the country, is not related to the cases in Quebec.

The province is also facing a salmonella outbreak in cheeses that has been blamed for the death of one elderly person and 90 illnesses.

But Agriculture Department officials made a point yesterday of justifying their intervention.

"We are confident the weekend

operation enabled us to limit the spreading of the bacteria, prevent news cases and maybe also save lives," said Guy Auclair, the

director of food inspections at the Agriculture Department.

He said the department will implement "extraordinary and temporary" measures to increase testing for listeriosis at cheese plants. The government

will pay for now, but Auclair said

its intention is to eventually pass on the bill to the cheese industry.

The Agriculture Department launched a special investigation of producers of raw milk cheese, which is more susceptible to listeria contamination.

Auclair said 33 cheese plants have so far been inspected by his department. Traces of listeriosis were found in 16 plants and four others were cleared. They are waiting for the results for the remaining plants.

"All the cheeses that are on sale right now are totally safe," Auclair said. "We are holding on to all the cheese that we suspect might have been contaminated."

But Quebec cheesemakers want more than just vigilance

from the government when it comes to listeriosis from cheese - they want cash.

"Of course, we need compensation," said Lucille Giroux, head of the Société des fromages du Québec, which represents 40 small cheesemakers.

"They destroyed 10,000 to 20,000 kilograms of cheese," Giroux said, referring to the weekend seizures by Agriculture Department officials.

A government fund should be set up for cheesemakers, Giroux said, because their business has plummeted in the past few weeks as the listeria outbreak from cheese has spread.

Although agriculture officials said it was too soon to discuss financial aid to the industry, Giroux said she has "good indications" the government will respond favourably to a fund.

Giroux, who runs La Moutonnière cheesemaker near Victoriaville, about 160 kilometres northeast of Montreal, said the

Quebec government needs to pinpoint the exact origin of the problem.

It will take a lot of information and persuasion to rebuild the confidence of consumers and retailers who buy from cheesemakers, she added.

Max Dubois, the owner of L'Échoppe des fromages in St Lambert, said he and some other cheesemakers will consider class-action lawsuit if aid does not come from Quebec within three weeks or so.

"Look, within two weeks we will have to pay our employees' salaries," Dubois said.

"That would normally come partly from revenues from cheeses we would have sold that they seized," he said. "Some businesses will crash."

"This is a catastrophe for small businesses," he said, noting that he has 22 employees and his display counters were bare of cheeses yesterday because there is no demand.

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