

## 'Zero risk,' Maple Leaf Food says

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TORONTO — The president of Maple Leaf Foods was on the hot seat yesterday, trying to explain how more contaminated products were found at the same Toronto plant that had been at the centre of a deadly source of food poisoning.

But Michael McCain stressed that there is no comparison between the latest samples that have tested positive for listeria and the tainted meat crisis that has so far claimed 20 lives across Canada and left another 33 people seriously ill. In the recent results, four out of 3,850 product samples and one environmental sample out of 671 tested positive for listeria.

"To suggest a shock at a positive environmental test is at best misguided and at worst fear mongering," Mr. McCain said at a news conference.

When the company's deli meats were first linked to an outbreak of the food-borne disease known as listeriosis last August, it was a humble Mr. McCain who stood before television cameras and reporters and apologized.

Yesterday, by contrast, he defiantly reproached those who have criticized Canada's food-safety watchdog, including the media, accusing them of undermining the public's confidence in the system and of potentially jeopardizing thousands of jobs.

"There's been a lot of criticism of the [Canadian Food Inspection Agency] in recent weeks," he said. "While there's likely lots of blame to go around, I personally see no balance in the reporting."

The latest contaminated samples pose "zero risk" to the public because Maple Leaf has not resumed distribution of deli meats from the plant since reopening it on Sept. 17, Mr. McCain said. The company only discovered the listeria because it has agreed to subject its finished products to testing as part of a process of getting the plant validated by the CFIA, he added.

He said it is unrealistic for the public to have zero tolerance for the bacteria because it is everywhere in the environment.

"Frankly, if that was the tolerance level of Canadians, then Canadians would starve. They wouldn't eat."

Mr. McCain said further testing is needed to determine how much bacteria was in each positive sample and to pin down the strain of listeria. He said a company would not normally publicize such test results, but the Maple Leaf Bartor Road plant is operating in a "fish bowl."

Others were less sanguine about the latest tests. Vinita Dubey, associate medical officer of health at Toronto Public Health, said she would think twice about allowing Maple Leaf cold cuts to be served again to hospital patients and residents of nursing homes.

"In a plant that has been the source of a nationwide outbreak, I would be cautious," she said in an interview.

Bob Kingston, president of the Agriculture Union representing CFIA inspectors, said while Mr. McCain is correct in saying that the listeria bacteria will always be around "that doesn't mean it's supposed to be in the packaging area of a ready-to-eat section of a processing plant, however. I mean it's possible to make rooms sterile. They do it all the time depending on what they're producing."

Mr. Kingston also noted that Maple Leaf does not do product testing in its day-to-day operations.

"They were only doing that as part of this protocol to make sure they're cleaning up and that CFIA will let them get back in production. Then product testing goes out of the window and that stuff would have ended up in some consumer's stomach."

*With a report from Caroline Alphonso*

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