



ONTARIO AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE
Department of Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics

Results from the Guelph Food Panel

The 2008 Ready-to-Eat Meats Food Recall: Consumer Awareness, Concerns and Behaviour

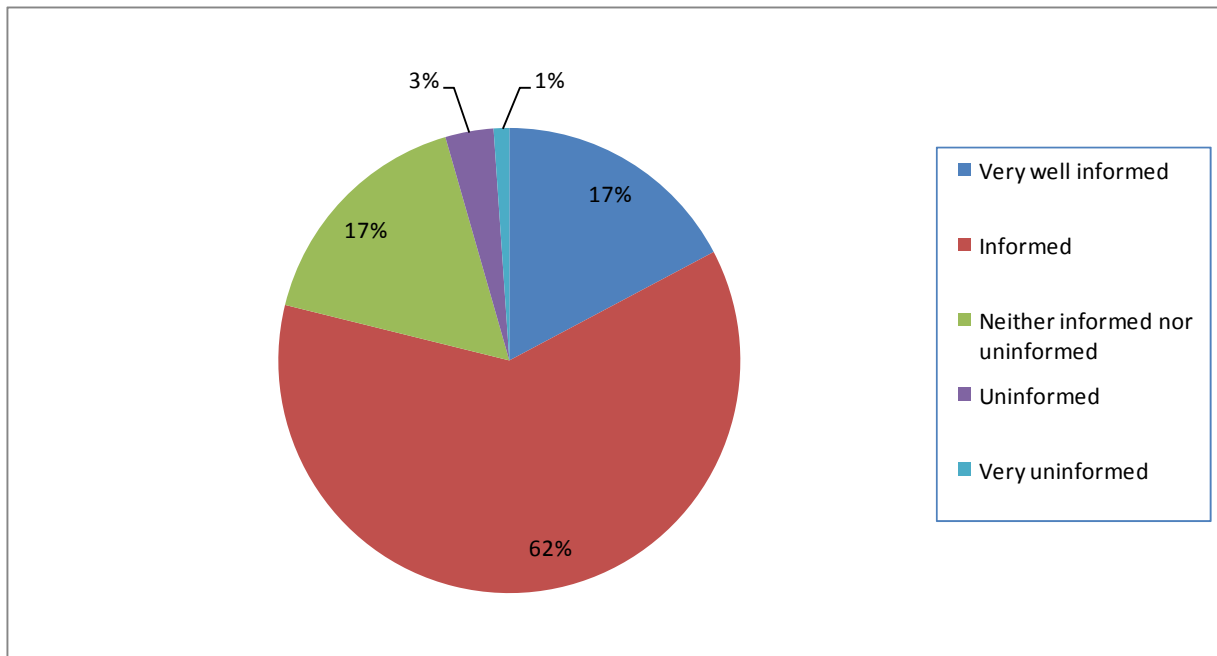
The International Food Economy Research Group (InFERG) based in the Department of Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics (FARE) at the University of Guelph has established a panel of 2000 consumers that is representative of the city of Guelph. Guelph is routinely used by market researchers as being broadly representative of the Canadian population as a whole. The panel is used to track changes in consumer perceptions and attitudes towards a broad range of food issues. A recent panel survey focused on consumer reaction to a food recall associated with *Listeria* contamination in ready-to-eat meat products produced by Maple Leaf Foods.

The Listeriosis outbreak was not only associated with the death of 20 people, and the illness of many other Canadians, it also contributed to economic loss within the food industry. However, the impact of the recall on consumer confidence in the food system and food consumption decisions remains largely unknown. Considering the public health and economic importance of food crises, the Guelph Food Panel was surveyed to assess consumer awareness of the recall, related concerns and changes in the consumption of ready-to-eat meats. Some of the key results are summarised below.

Consumers have a high level of awareness

Respondents were asked about their knowledge of the recall associated with ready-to-eat meats. Around 96 percent of consumers knew about the recall, 95 percent knew that the food recall originated in Canada and 92 percent identified correctly *Listeria* as the cause of the recall. The main sources of information on recall were: television (78%), radio (65%), newspapers (60%) and the internet (41%). Overall, the majority of respondents (79%) considered that they were informed or very well informed about the recall (Figure 1).

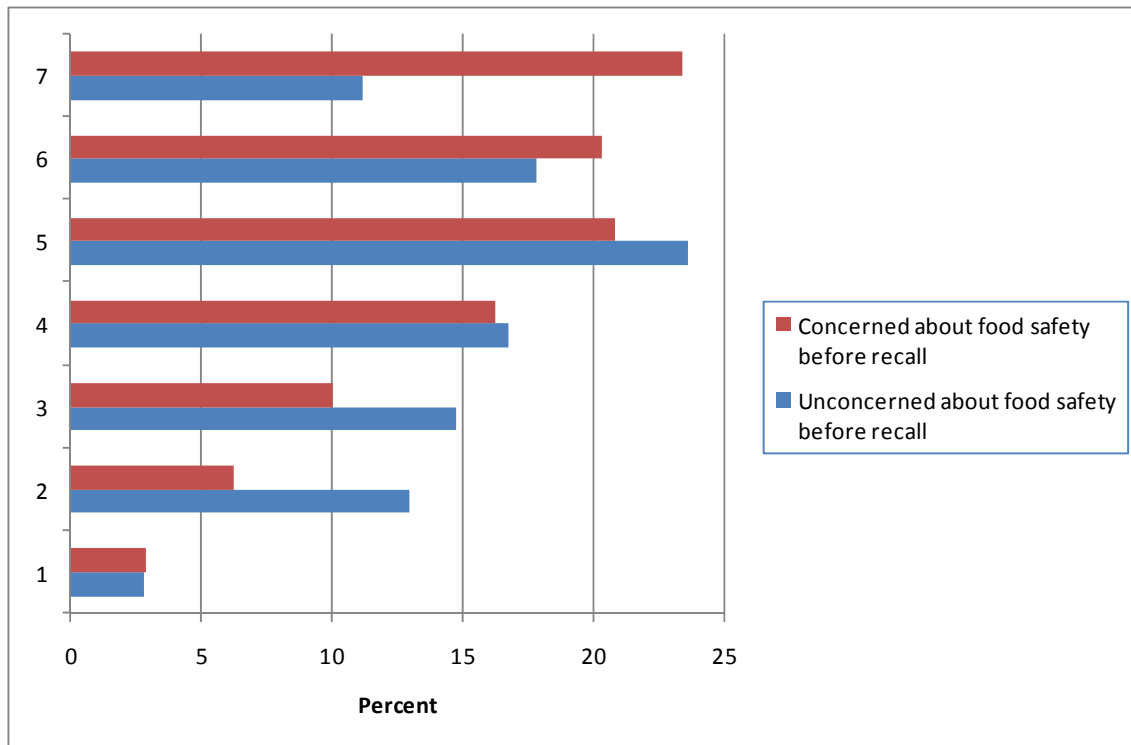
Figure 1. Degree to which respondents' felt that they were informed about the 2008 Listeria food recall



Consumers' concerns about the risks associated with ready-to-eat meats following the recall

In a previous survey, panellists were asked about their overall concern regarding the safety of food in Canada. Figure 2 shows that respondents who previously expressed concerns about food safety in general were more likely to be concerned about the safety of ready-to-eat meats following the recall. Around 44 percent of respondents with prior concerns about food safety were concerned or extremely concerned about the food recall, compared to 30 percent of the unconcerned respondents. This suggests that prevailing concerns about food safety are a key factor influencing how consumers respond to food recalls. Across respondents as a whole, the level of concern about the safety of ready-to-eat meats was moderate with an average score of 4.76 (on a scale from 1 = extremely unconcerned and 7 = extremely concerned). Moreover, nearly 75 percent of respondents indicated that it is 'true' or 'likely true' that ready-to-eat meats available in supermarkets, restaurants and fast food outlets are safe to eat.

Figure 2. Concerns about potential risks associated with ready-to-eat meats after the 2008 Listeria recall



Note: Scale from 1 = 'extremely unconcerned' to 7 = 'extremely concerned'

Change in consumers' behaviour due to the food recall

Although consumers were not extremely concerned about the potential food safety risks associated with ready-to-eat meats after the recall, they have made some changes to their purchase, preparation and consumption behaviour relating to food. The proportion of consumers indicating that they never consume ready-to-eat meats at home increased from six to 39 percent (Figure 3), while those indicating they never consume ready-to-eat meats in restaurants or fast food outlets increased from around nine to 56 percent (Figures 4). In addition, a significant proportion of consumers now pay more attention to food labels (52%), cooking more foods at home (32%), take more care in food preparation (30%), have stopped buying ready-to-eat meats from Canada (30%), and eat less at restaurants and fast food outlets (27%) (Figure 5).

Figure 3. Frequency of consumption of ready-to-eat meats at home, before and after the 2008 Listeria food recall

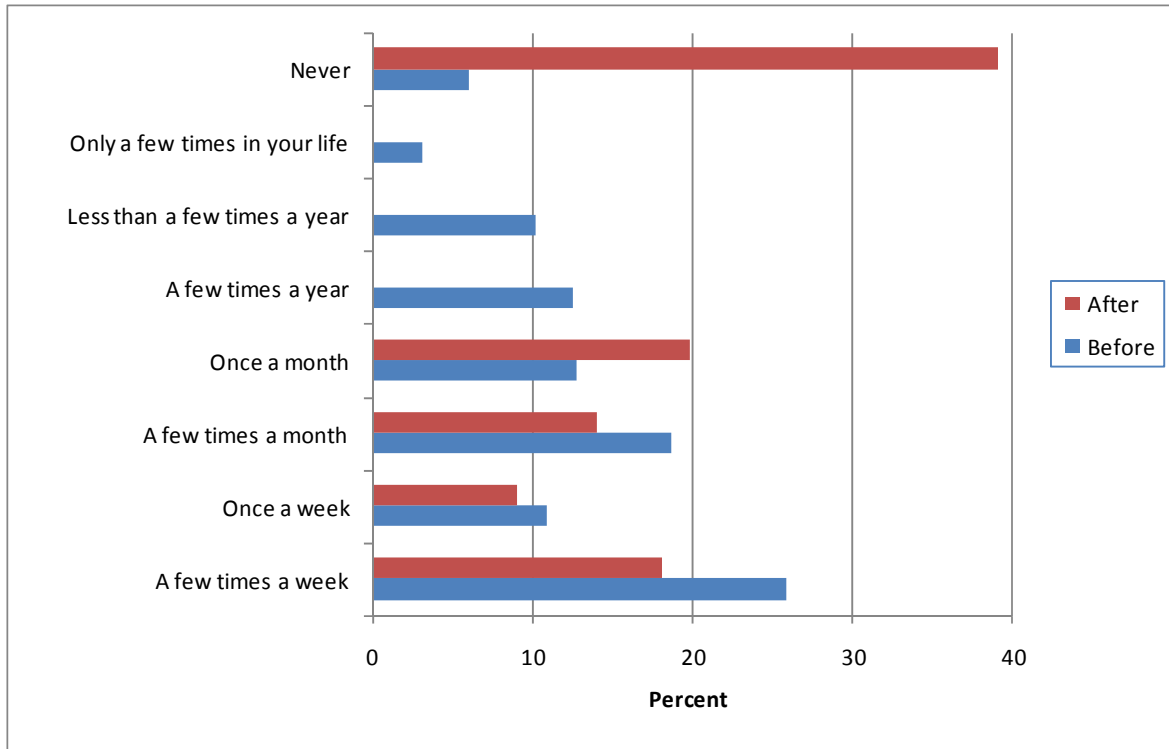


Figure 4. Frequency of consumption of ready-to-eat meats in restaurants or fast food outlets, before and after the 2008 Listeria food recall

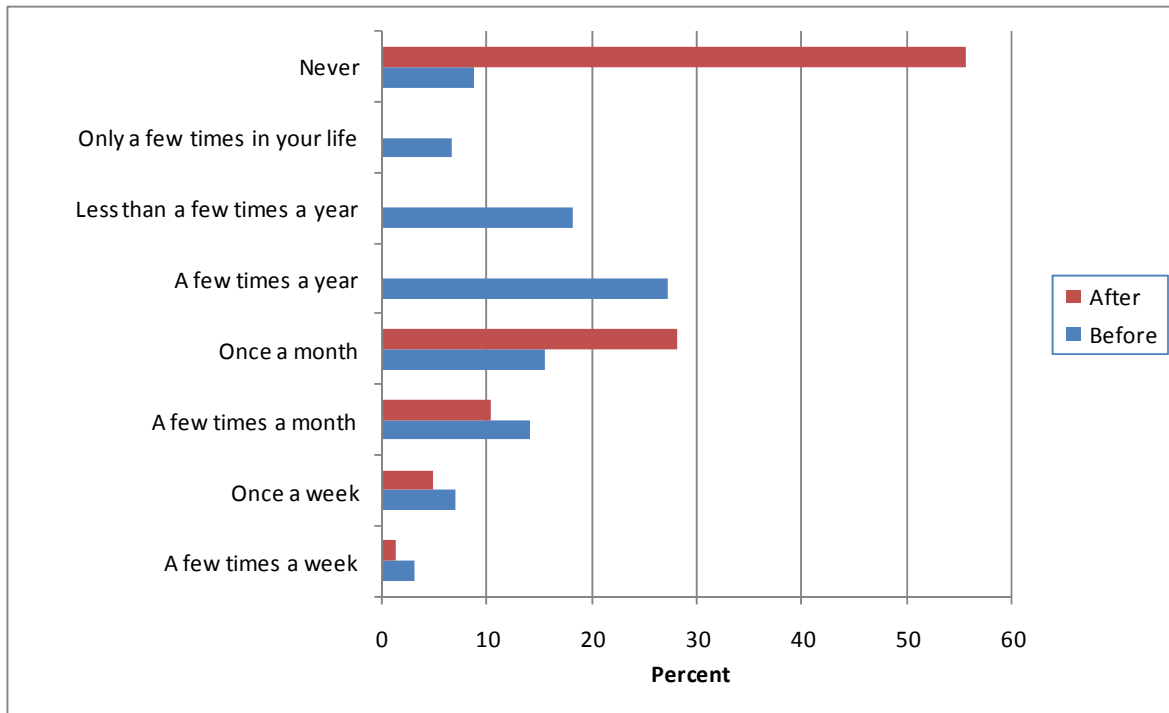
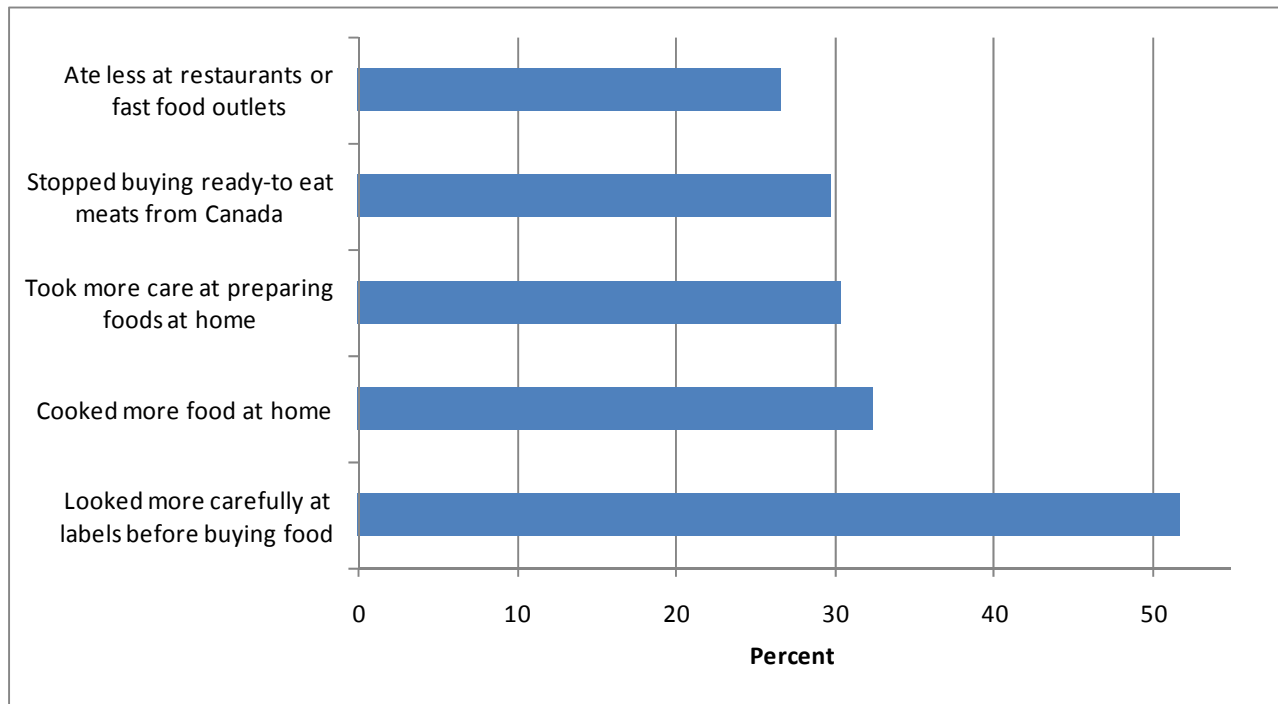


Figure 5. Changes in consumer behaviour after the 2008 Listeria food recall

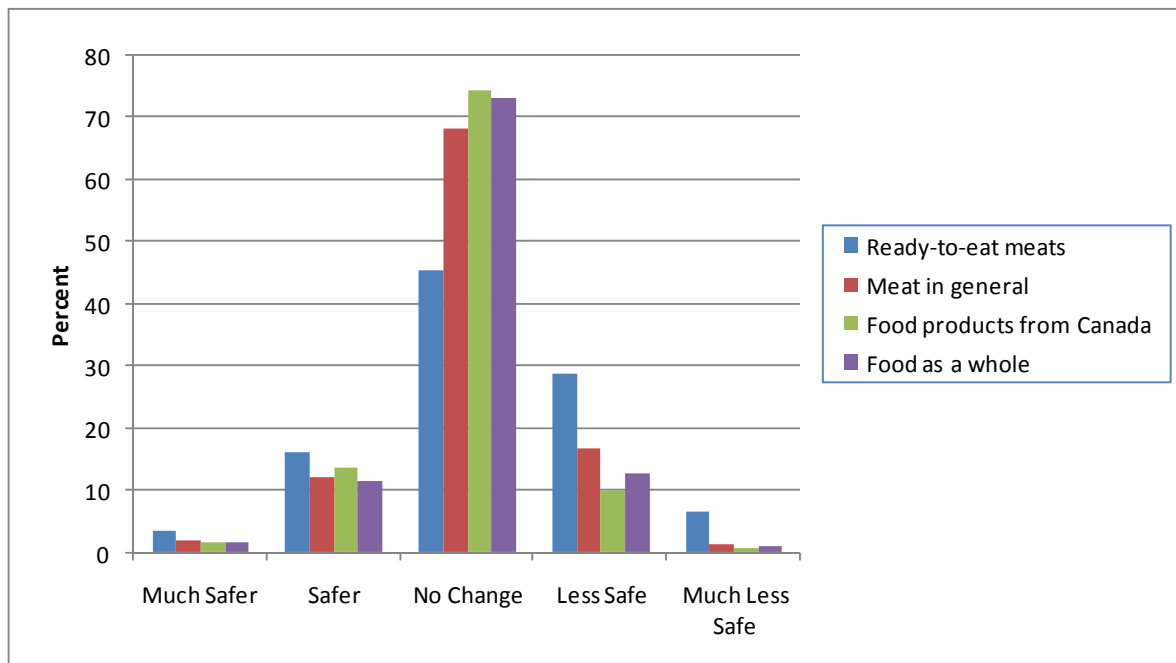


Opinions about food safety and trust in food industry stakeholders

Around 45 percent of respondents indicated that their perceptions of the safety of ready-to-eat meats had not changed since the recall. However, 35 percent indicated that ready-to-eat meats are less or much less safe. Around 70 percent of consumers indicated that their perceptions of the safety of meat in general, food products from Canada and food as a whole had not changed. This suggests that consumers have not generalised the Listeria food recall to their perceptions of food as a whole (Figure 6).

In spite of the relatively favourable perceptions of the safety of food in Canada, trust in the ability of the food sector to protect consumers from Listeria was moderate (Figure 7). Farmers were judged to have the greatest ability to ensure the safety of food (with a score of 4.0 on a scale from 1 = strongly agree and 7 = strongly disagree), while restaurants, the food service sector and grocers were judged to have the least ability (with a score of 3.0). Trust in government and related government agencies to ensure the safety of food ranged from 3.20 to 3.56, suggesting a certain degree of ambiguity.

Figure 6. Consumers' opinion about food safety



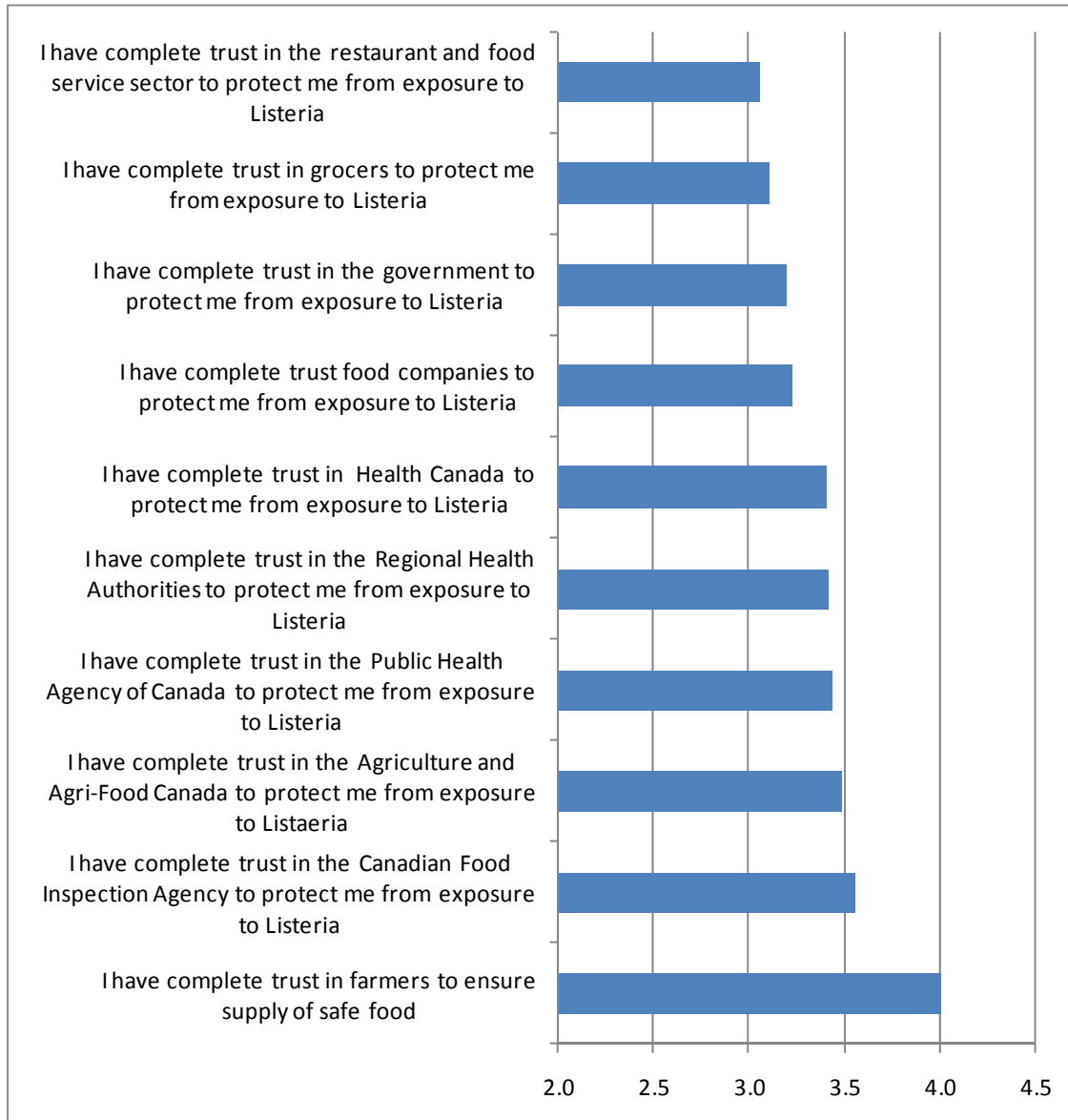
Conclusions

These latest results from the Guelph Food Panel show the high level of awareness of consumers about the recent food recall associated with *Listeria* in ready-to-eat meats. Before the food recall, consumers did not consider the potential risks of ready-to-eat meats to be significant. While most consumers remain confident in the safety of food products in Canada, many have made changes to their purchase and consumption behaviour, both relating to ready-to-eat meats and food preparation at home. Although overall perceptions of food safety in Canada remain high, the trust of consumers in food chain stakeholders to protect them from *Listeria* is ambiguous.

For further information on the Guelph Food Panel please contact: Spencer Henson (shenson@uoquelfh.ca), John Cranfield (jcranfie@uoquelfh.ca) or Oliver Masakure (masakure@uoquelfh.ca) in the International food Economy Research Group (www.inferg.ca) at the University of Guelph.

11 November 2008

Figure 7. Respondents' trust in food stakeholders



Note: Scale from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 7 = 'strongly agree'