



# CFIA report card:

Assessing Regulatory Burden and Service Delivery for SMEs

October 2025

Table of contents

Facts & findings ..... 2

Introduction ..... 3

SME interactions with the CFIA..... 4

    Which sectors interact with the CFIA ..... 4

    How SMEs interact with the CFIA ..... 5

    SMEs agree the CFIA helps ensure food safety ..... 6

Impacts of regulations on small businesses ..... 6

    Overall impacts of red tape on small business owners ..... 6

    How the regulatory burden has evolved..... 7

    Key causes of regulatory burden for SMEs ..... 9

    Lack of consideration of SMEs leads to burdensome rules ..... 10

    Impacts of the *Safe Food for Canadians Regulations* (SFCR) on SMEs.... 11

    Efforts from business owners to comply with regulations ..... 12

SMEs’ perception of CFIA services and support ..... 14

    Overall services ..... 14

    The CFIA’s website ..... 14

    CFIA agents..... 15

    CFIA inspectors ..... 16

    Appeals..... 17

    Fees..... 18

Conclusion & recommendations..... 19

How to cite

Nicolaÿ Juliette, Moen Béatrice, CFIA Report Card: Assessing Regulatory Burden and Service Delivery for SMEs, Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB), October 2025.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sur la page <https://www.cfib-fcei.ca/fr/rapports-de-recherche/bulletin-de-l-acia>

Except as otherwise specifically noted, the information in this publication may be freely reproduced without charge or further permission from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB), provided that: 1) due diligence is exercised in ensuring the accuracy of the information reproduced; 2) CFIB is identified as the source; and 3) the reproduction is not presented as an official version or as having been endorsed by CFIB. For permission to reproduce the information in this publication for commercial purposes, please contact us at [research@cfib.ca](mailto:research@cfib.ca).

## Goal

This report aims to assess regulatory burden associated with the CFIA and service delivery for SMEs, and to provide recommendations to ensure that measures related to food safety and affordability are well aligned with SME realities.

## Facts & findings

**SMEs recognize that the CFIA plays an important role** in safeguarding food safety and maintaining Canada's global reputation.

Most SMEs (58%) report that **the regulatory burden associated with the CFIA has increased over the past five years**. Further, most business owners (58%) affected by the SFCR do not agree that their implementation positively impacted their business.

Nearly 80% of SMEs believe **excessive government regulations hamper entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and productivity, and cause significant stress**.

**Many small businesses feel overlooked by the CFIA or governments**, with 59% saying their needs are not considered when creating regulations and 54% believing their feedback is not valued.

While 67% of SMEs have developed internal solutions to comply with regulations, **many still rely on CFIA resources or external professionals for compliance support**.

However, **only 25% of small business owners rate the CFIA's overall service as "good,"** with the majority rating it as "fair" or "poor."

- Digital tools do not meet the needs of SMEs, as only 1 in 10 business owners considers the CFIA's online resources to be "good."
- On average, only one-third of SMEs rate the services provided by CFIA agents (treatment, knowledge, promptness of responses, and accessibility) as "good."
- Nearly half of small business owners find the knowledge of CFIA inspectors "fair" or "poor," often citing inconsistency as a top irritant.

## Recommendations

1. Expand the scope of the Administrative Burden Baseline to include in legislation, policies, and guidelines.
2. Reduce the total number of regulations by implementing a "2-for-1" rule.
3. Simplify existing regulations and guidance.
4. Communicate and promote changes to regulations or new regulations in a clear, timely way.
5. Provide clear examples of what constitutes compliance.
6. Reduce the level of fees to make regulatory compliance accessible to small businesses.
7. Improve customer service by ensuring timely, accurate, and easily digestible resources.
8. Improve the relevancy, user-friendliness, and availability of online tools.
9. Clearly explain outcomes of inspections.
10. Improve timeliness of decision-making.
11. Improve the transparency and fairness of the CFIA's complaints process.
12. Provide updates on suppliers' licence status.
13. Facilitate the internal trade of food products.

## Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent 98% of all Canadian businesses and employ 64% of the total labour force (7.9 million individuals).<sup>i</sup> Consequently, they play a vital role in driving economic growth, creating jobs, and delivering essential goods and services from coast to coast to coast. To thrive in today's fast-paced and highly competitive environment, SMEs must be adaptable, innovative, and ready to seize new opportunities, rendering it more important than ever for governments to support them.

However, small business operations are hindered as they face significant challenges navigating Canada's complex regulatory landscape. Most small business owners are managing government regulations themselves, taking time away from operating and growing their business, serving customers, and training employees. In fact, regulatory compliance represents the second most important cost (67%) for small businesses across the country, totalling an estimated \$51 billion annually.<sup>ii,iii</sup> On average, businesses spend 735 hours per year meeting regulatory requirements at all levels of government, with 256 of those hours (or 32 business days) devoted to managing red tape.<sup>iv</sup> Red tape refers to the duplicative, redundant, or confusing rules and regulations, administrative obstacles, excessive paper burden, and poor customer service Canadians face every day from all levels of government. These burdens and costs weigh disproportionately on small businesses, which have fewer resources and less capacity to manage compliance.

Food-related businesses are among the most heavily regulated, with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) responsible for a significant share of that burden. The CFIA is the federal agency responsible for administering and enforcing food safety and quality standards. While Health Canada sets many of

these policies and standards, the CFIA also develops regulatory instruments to implement the legislation it administers. Its mandate covers a wide range of areas, including food safety, animal and plant health, and international market access. Through its inspections and enforcement responsibilities, the CFIA routinely interacts with food-related SMEs to ensure compliance.

Small business owners understand the CFIA's role in protecting public health and ensuring the safety and integrity of Canada's food system. These regulations can help uphold consumer trust and safeguard the reputation of Canadian food products at home and abroad. For example, in 2019, the CFIA introduced the *Safe Food for Canadians Regulations* (SFCR) to strengthen food safety and streamline processes. However, the SFCR also brought new rules around licensing, traceability, and preventative control, which required small businesses to understand and adapt to a new set of rules and requirements. Business owners want to comply with food safety regulations, but they require clear, consistent, and effective services to help them understand the rules and regulations applicable to their business and ensure compliance. Many have identified the CFIA as one of the most burdensome government agencies in terms of red tape, and have highlighted areas where service, regulations, and communication can be improved.

This report explores how SMEs interact with the CFIA, assesses the regulatory burden associated with the CFIA, as well as the quality of customer services, and the improvements SMEs seek. It primarily speaks to the experiences of micro and small businesses, as 34% of surveyed business owners who interact with the CFIA have four or fewer employees, and 44% have between five and nineteen. This is CFIB's third *CFIA Report Card*, following editions published in 2007 and 2014.

## SME interactions with the CFIA

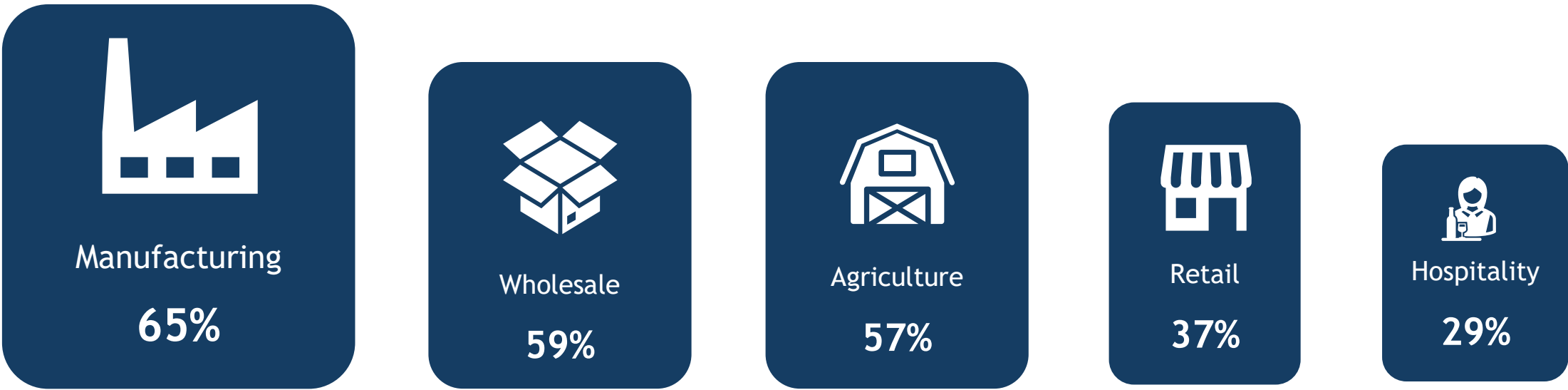
### Which sectors interact with the CFIA

The CFIA oversees Canada’s business activities related to food, animals, and plants. Given the breadth of its mandate, it is not surprising that a wide range of industries engage with the agency. The largest share of small businesses interacting with the CFIA is in the manufacturing sector (65%), which mainly includes food and beverage processors (Figure 1). Over half of small businesses

in wholesale (59%) and agriculture (57%) also regularly interact directly with the CFIA. Finally, small businesses in retail (37%) and hospitality (11%) also report interactions with the CFIA in the last five years. These sectors are active throughout the entire food supply chain, demonstrating the range of the CFIA’s involvement.

Figure 1

**Manufacturing, wholesale, and agriculture are the sectors that interact the most with the CFIA**



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 309.

Question: Has your business interacted directly with the CFIA in the past five years? (Select one)

Note: The survey sample was restricted to members deemed likely to have interacted with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

How SMEs interact with the CFIA

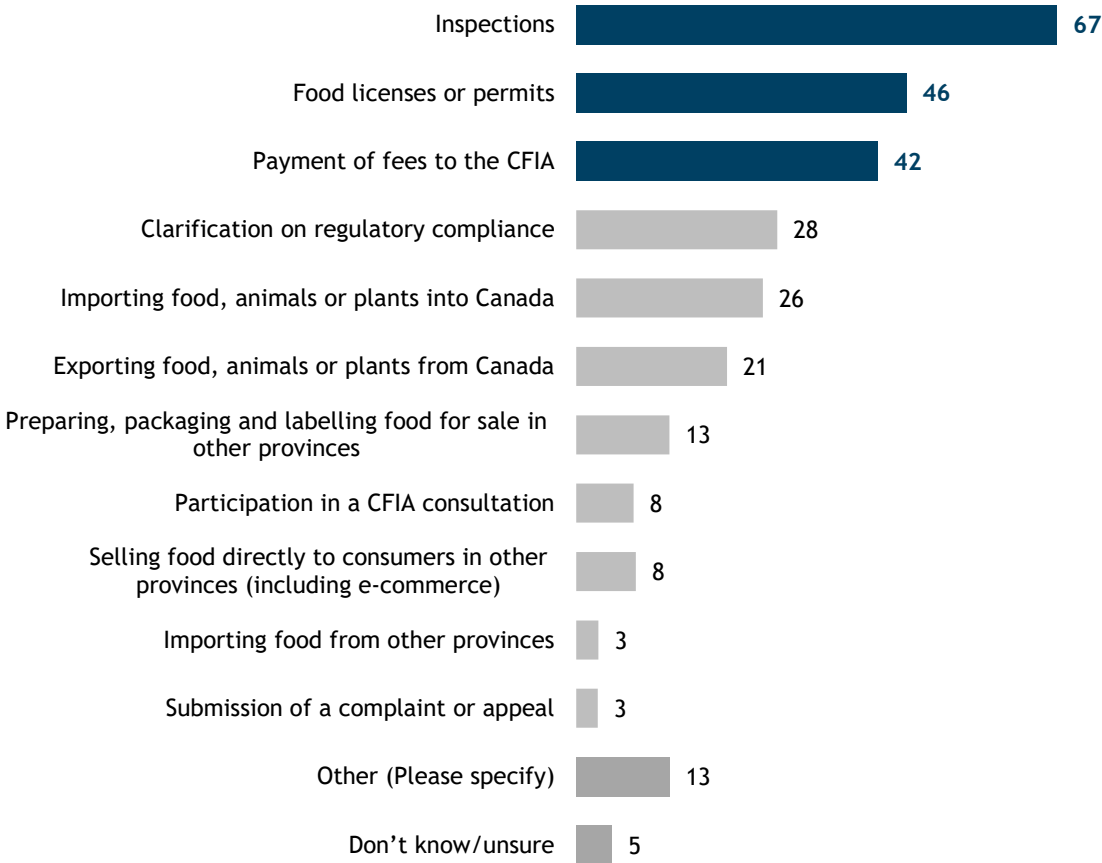
The most common point of contact between SMEs and the CFIA is through inspections (67%) (Figure 2). These inspections may include sample collection and testing, evaluation of a business's preventive control plan, and assessment of whether products and documentation meet regulatory criteria and requirements.

Licensing and permitting are also a major driver of engagement. The internal and international trade of food-related commodities requires products to come from a federally licensed and/or inspected business. As such, nearly half (46%) of surveyed SMEs reported interacting with the CFIA regarding food licences or permits, while 42% cited payment of related fees, which is often tied to holding a licence.

In the context of international trade, 26% of small business owners reported working with the CFIA to import food, plants, or animals into Canada, and 21% to export them. The CFIA also regulates food trade within Canada, prompting 13% of SMEs to interact with the agency for preparing, packaging, and labelling food intended for sale in other provinces. An additional 8% reported dealing with the CFIA when selling food directly to consumers in other provinces.

More than one in four (28%) have reached out to the CFIA for clarification on regulatory compliance, highlighting the difficulty SMEs face understanding certain CFIA regulations. Finally, only 8% of SMEs have participated in a CFIA consultation and 3% have submitted a complaint or an appeal.

Figure 2  
67% of business owners have been inspected by the CFIA in the past five years



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 276.  
Question: In what ways has your business interacted with the CFIA in the past five years? (Select all that apply)

SMEs agree the CFIA helps ensure food safety

A majority of small business owners recognize and value the role of the CFIA in maintaining a safe and reliable food system in Canada (Figure 3). More than three-quarters (76%) agree that food safety regulations help ensure product quality and safety. More than two-thirds (67%) also believe these regulations strengthen Canada’s global reputation for food safety, which can positively influence market access, consumer trust, and business confidence.

Product quality, safety, and reputation are critical for the well-being of Canadians and for the business’s own success. As such, small business owners want to comply with the food safety regulations that apply to their business, and need clarity, consistency, and efficiency from the CFIA to do so.

Figure 3  
Small business owners recognize the importance of CFIA regulations to ensure the quality, safety and reputation of Canadian food products



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 216.  
Question: Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. (Select one for each line)

Impacts of regulations on small businesses

Overall impacts of red tape on small business owners

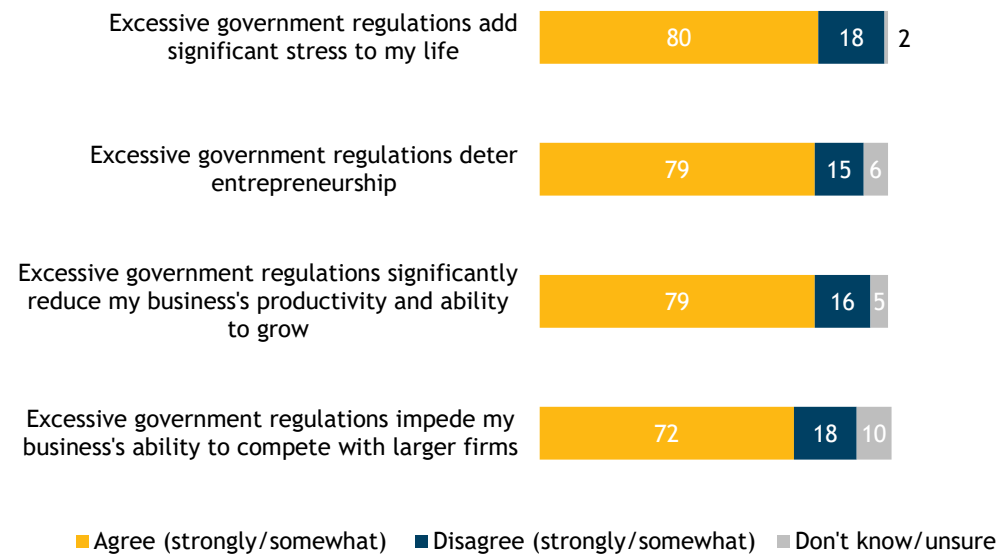
Business owners wear many hats. On any given day, they act as accountants, marketers, human resources managers, or customer service representatives. Given these competing demands, it is essential that policymakers and government agencies recognize the limited time and capacity small business owners have to dedicate to navigating complex regulatory requirements.

Importantly, business owners are subject to regulations from a range of other federal, provincial, and municipal bodies. The average small business spends the equivalent of 92 days per year managing government regulations, including 32 days solely on red tape.<sup>y</sup> This is why CFIB members consistently cite red tape reduction at all levels of government as one of the most effective ways to improve business profitability and productivity.

The cumulative burden of compliance affects more than just financial operational efficiency; it has broader implications for Canada’s entrepreneurial landscape and economy. Nearly four in five (79%) business owners report that excessive government regulation discourages entrepreneurship and significantly reduces their business’s productivity and ability to grow (Figure 4).

A worrying 80% say that excessive regulations add significant stress to their lives, revealing the professional and personal toll of red tape. Further, nearly three-quarters (72%) of surveyed business owners believe that excessive government regulations impede their business’s ability to compete with larger firms. In the manufacturing sector, 82% of SMEs report that excessive regulation undermines their ability to compete with firms that have larger administrative and legal support and resources (Figure 4).

Figure 4  
**Excessive government regulations hinder entrepreneurship, productivity, and competitiveness, and cause stress for a majority of business owners**



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n= 221.  
Question: Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the overall burden of government regulations. (Select one for each line)

“We strongly support the CFIA in its role to ensure Canadian food safety, however, regulatory overreach can be very detrimental to success. I believe that a role in supporting industry driven change is much more effective.”

Livestock and Animal Specialty Farms, AB

How the regulatory burden has evolved

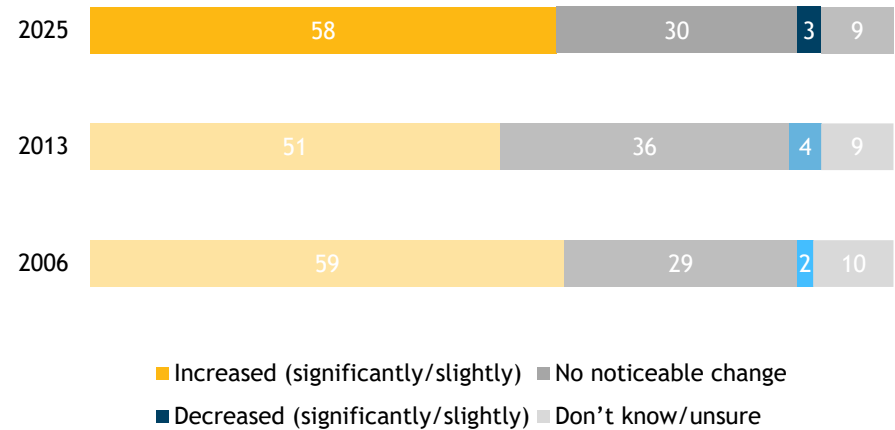
In all CFIB reports on the CFIA, small business owners have consistently reported an increase in the overall burden caused by regulations administered and enforced by the agency. Currently, 58% of business owners find that the regulatory burden associated with the CFIA has increased over the past five years, up from 51% in 2013 (Figure 5). SMEs in the agriculture sector are more likely to report an increase (67%). In contrast, very few respondents—just 3% in 2025, 4% in 2013, and 2% in 2006—reported that the burden had decreased.

The regions most likely to report an increase in the regulatory burden related to the CFIA are the Western provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan) (68%) and Quebec (66%) (Figure 6). This regional disparity underscores the need to simplify existing regulations and guidance to ensure greater consistency in how regulations are interpreted and enforced across all jurisdictions.

Furthermore, to prevent the continued increase in regulatory burden, policy makers should implement a “two-for-one” rule, whereby two existing regulatory requirements are eliminated for every new one introduced. This rule should apply to all government agencies and departments and would alleviate the regulatory burden associated with the CFIA.

SMEs understand that food safety regulations are essential to protect public health, ensure product quality, and maintain trust in Canada’s food system. They also expect the CFIA’s regulatory approach to be efficient, well designed, and responsive to small business realities to facilitate compliance without placing unnecessary strain on small businesses’ operations and revenues.

Figure 5  
**58% of small business owners say regulatory burden associated with the CFIA has increased between 2019 and 2024**

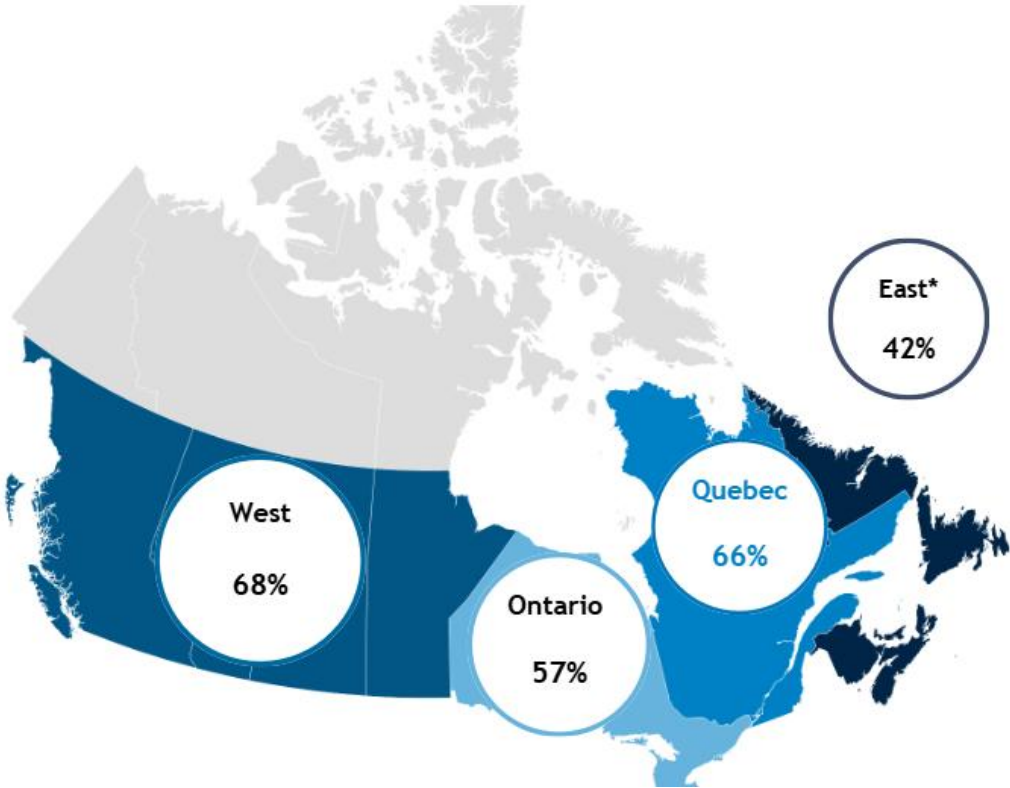


Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 228.  
Question: During the past five years, how has the overall burden of the CFIA regulations on your business changed (i.e., the amount of time and money spent on complying with CFIA regulations)?  
Note: For reporting purposes, responses for “significantly increased” and “slightly increased” were combined.

“It’s good to know that Canada takes food safety seriously, but there must be a balance between safety and the realities of doing business.”

Food and Beverage Retail and Hospitality, ON

Figure 6  
**Quebec and the West feel the biggest increase in CFIA regulatory burden**



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 228.  
Question: During the past five years, how has the overall burden of CFIA regulations on your business changed (i.e., the amount of time and money spent on complying with CFIA regulations)?  
Notes: 1. Respondents that selected “No,” “Don’t know/Unsure,” and “Not applicable” are not displayed.  
2. \*Small sample size (<40).  
3. “West” refers to British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan; “East” refers to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island.

Key causes of regulatory burden for SMEs

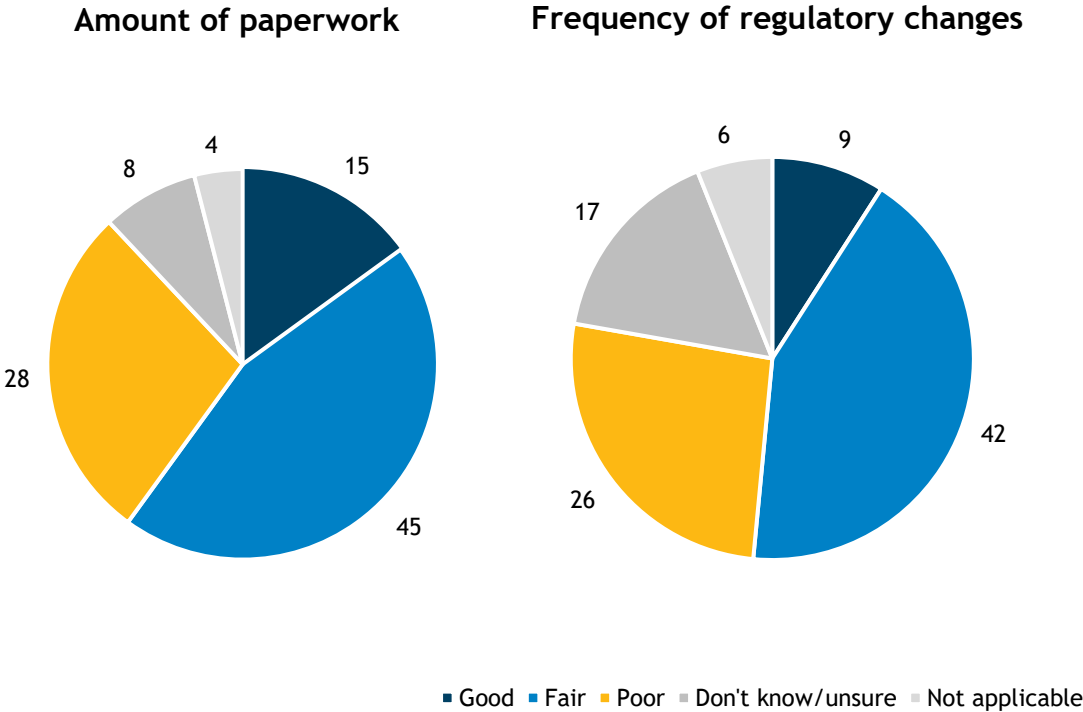
While a majority of small business owners (58%) believe that overall regulatory burden tied to the CFIA has grown (Figure 5), a closer look reveals that the amount of paperwork required and the frequency of regulatory changes are key pain points for SMEs. The administrative demands placed on business owners, such as completing numerous forms, managing multiple accounts, and submitting detailed information to remain compliant, require significant time and resources, particularly for businesses with limited administrative capacity. In fact, more than a quarter (28%) of surveyed business owners rate the amount of CFIA-related paperwork as “poor” (Figure 7). Among those who already feel that the CFIA’s overall burden has increased, this figure climbs to 43%.

It is encouraging that the perception of the paperwork burden related to the CFIA has slightly improved compared to previous years, with “poor” rating falling from 41% in 2013 and 44% in 2006. However, the dissatisfaction of nearly 30% of SMEs regarding paperwork suggests significant room for improvement.

Furthermore, a high frequency of regulatory changes can also have significant consequences on small business owners' compliance efforts. Frequent updates to rules and requirements create ongoing challenges for small businesses, which must continually monitor, interpret, and adapt to shifting expectations. Overall, 26% of small business owners rate the CFIA as “poor” in terms of frequency of regulatory changes (Figure 8). Among those who reported an increased CFIA burden, this figure reaches 42%. Only 9% of business owners currently rate the CFIA as “good” in terms of pace regulatory change and 42% say it is “fair.”

Improving communication around regulatory updates and offering clearer and more predictable timelines could help shift “fair” ratings into the “good” category.

Figures 7 & 8  
More than one-quarter of business owners say the CFIA’s paperwork and frequency of regulatory changes are “poor”



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 226.  
Question 1: How would you rate the CFIA on each of the following regulatory aspects? (Select one for each line) | Amount of paperwork. Question 2: How would you rate the CFIA on each of the following regulatory aspects? (Select one for each line) | Frequency of regulatory changes.

Lack of consideration of SMEs leads to burdensome rules

The CFIA’s Statement of Values asserts that they “value the perspectives of the stakeholders who are affected by [their] decisions.”<sup>vi</sup> However, while many SMEs regularly interact with the CFIA, a significant portion feel overlooked by the agency or governments. Nearly three in five (59%) small business owners believe they are not adequately considered when designing regulations (Figure 9), up from 40% in 2013. This leads to regulations being created, implemented, and enforced in ways that are burdensome and out of touch with operational realities.

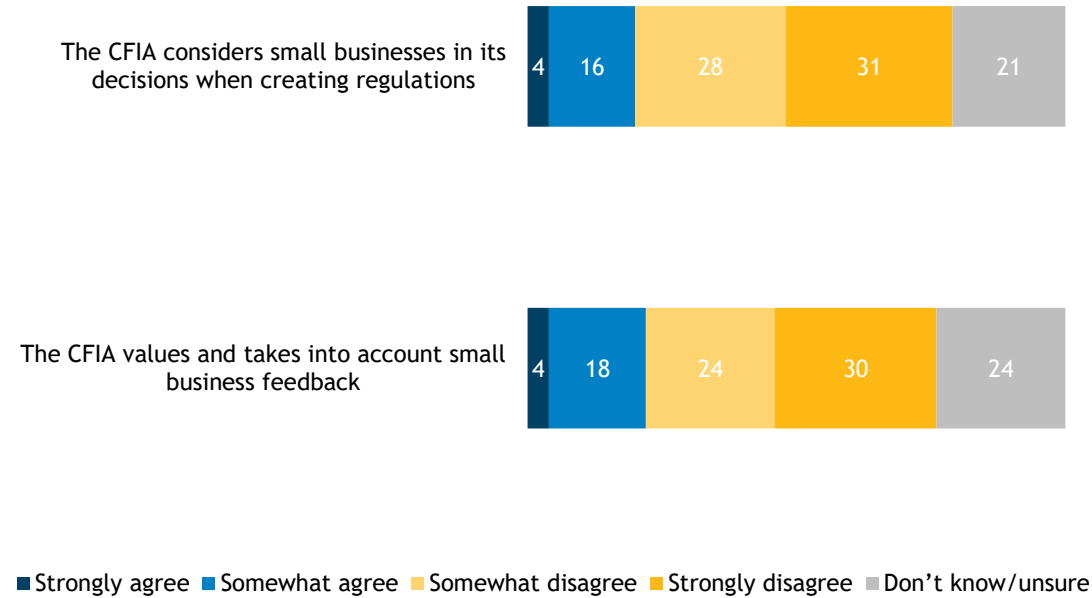
This disconnect is compounded by a perceived lack of responsiveness to small business input. Only 22% of SMEs believe their perspectives are considered, while more than half (54%) do not believe the CFIA values or takes into account their feedback (Figure 9). This gap points to a clear need for enhanced engagement between governments and the CFIA and the SMEs it regulates.

As discussed on the following page, the SFCR are a key example of this. Despite their goal to streamline processes, small businesses feel their perspectives were not adequately considered or reflected in the design of these regulations.

“We face the same rules as large companies with Regulatory Affairs departments. We are a company with revenues in the \$1-2 million range and 3 employees, so the regulatory burden falls on me. All these rules are designed to make it more difficult for small businesses to compete with larger ones—the ones who are actually consulted when the rules are drawn up.”

Food and Beverage Retail and Hospitality, ON

Figure 9  
A strong majority of small business owners do not feel considered by the CFIA



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 216.  
Question: Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.  
(Select one for each line)

“It’s frustrating to deal with a government that makes regulations without understanding the type of businesses they impact.”

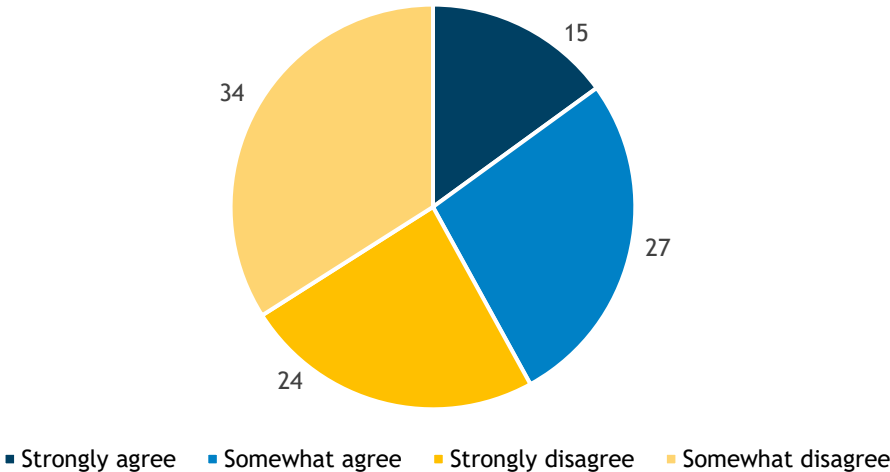
Food and Beverage Retail and Hospitality, SK

Impacts of the *Safe Food for Canadians Regulations* (SFCR) on SMEs

In 2019, the SFCR were introduced to help Canada adapt to increasingly integrated and global food supply chains by creating more consistent food safety rules and improving traceability.<sup>vii</sup> The implementation of the SFCR is a recent example of a major CFIA-related regulatory change that required many business owners to adjust their ways of doing business to stay compliant. However, business owners affected by the SFCR do not report positive impacts (58%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10

**Most business owners (58%) affected by the SFCR do not agree that they positively impacted their business**



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 118.  
Question: Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: The implementation of the SFCR (2019) positively impacted our business.  
Note: Respondents that selected “Not applicable” and “Don’t know/Unsure” were excluded to only keep those that were affected by the SFCR.

“The SFCR is a burden on small businesses and Christmas for large multinationals.”

Food and Beverage Product Processing, NS

This is what business owners had to say on the challenges of the new regulations:

**Increased time spent on regulatory compliance:** “The implementation of the regulation added a significant amount of documentation to complete before we could begin our 2020 vegetable packing season, which caused us to lose a month and incur major financial losses. Since then, CFIA inspection procedures have become increasingly complex and time-consuming and require substantial assistance (manpower, appropriate facilities, equipment modifications to make them ergonomic for inspectors, etc.).” —Fruit, Vegetables, and Horticultural Specialties, QC

**Created redundancies:** “This has been a huge burden as they are now auditing our business, and it is redundant to the Food Safety Audits I already perform. It creates an unnecessary burden and the stress of my team to fill out redundant paperwork.” —Fruit, Vegetables, and Horticultural Specialties, ON

**Having to establish a Preventive Control Plan:** “I had to figure out how to create this entire plan on my own, and it wasn’t clear what was required of me. Setting up a HACCP system was a huge amount of work, and I had to hire someone to help me, which added costs. The whole process was extremely stressful.” —Food and Beverage Retail and Hospitality, MB

“We had to hire 3 different consultants to finally get an approval of an export permit. The problem was not with our product, but with how our preventive control plans were worded.” —Food and Beverage Retail and Hospitality, ON

**Increased the cost of doing business:** *“Under the new rules, we need to register about 20 products before importing, with CFIA fees of around \$1,150 per product (about \$23,000 total). Because registration is technical and requires testing, we must hire a consultant, costing \$5,000-\$10,000 per product. Altogether, importing this product line into Canada would cost between \$150,000 and \$200,000.”* —Wholesale and Supply for Agriculture, QC

**Discontinued certain products:** *“The red tape and amount of time spent to deal with compliance for importing a small amount of packaged food was not worthwhile for my business. Customers were disappointed that these products were not available anymore.”* —Food and Beverage Retail and Hospitality, MB

**Reduced ability to order from small businesses:** *“The supplier approval process requires Letters of Guarantee, product specification sheets, and certificates of analysis—burdensome and costly paperwork that only larger companies with dedicated Quality Assurance teams can provide. These suppliers also demand larger minimum orders, making it impractical for small businesses needing smaller quantities and preventing us from supporting local suppliers.”* —Food and Beverage Product Processing, AB

A handful of business owners report positive experiences with the SFCR:

**Enhanced safety and quality of product:** *“It drives us to make our products and packaging better.”* —Food and Beverage Product Processing, QC

*“Regulations and traceability have ensured the stability of my production.”* —Livestock & Animal Specialty Farms, SK

**Strengthened consumer trust and reputation:** *“[It] builds trust with our clients.”* —Fruit, Vegetables, and Horticultural Specialties, QC

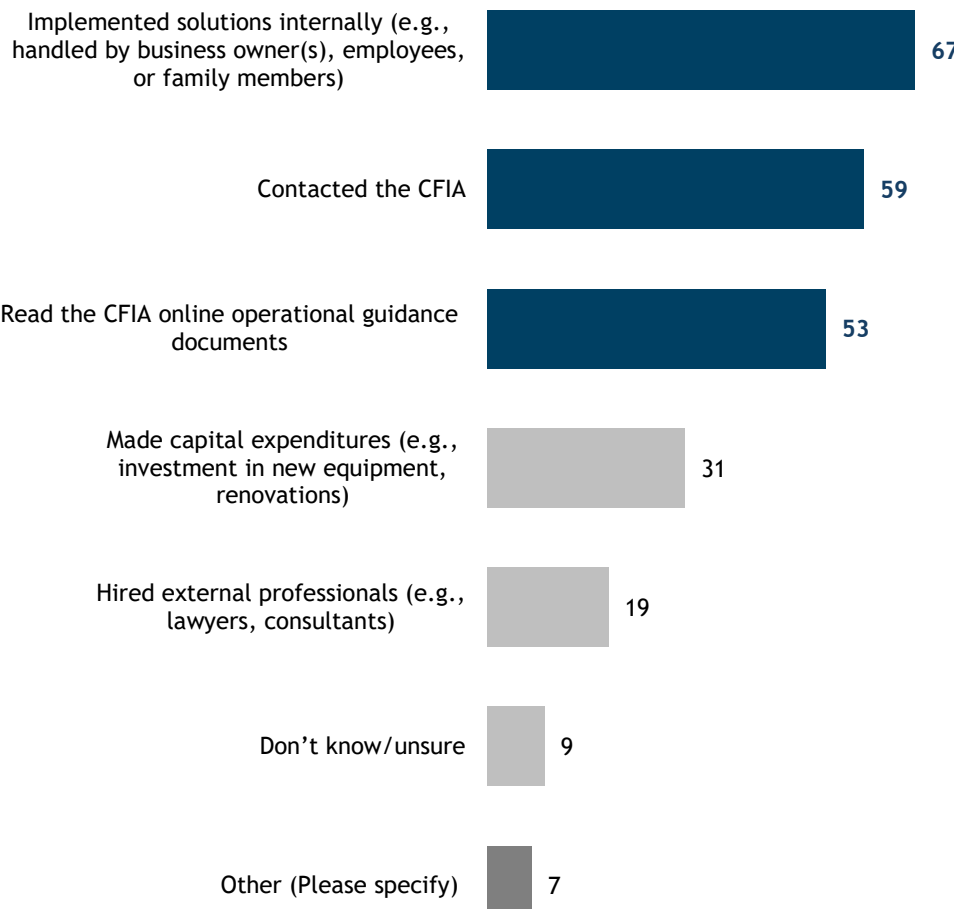
## Efforts from business owners to comply with regulations

When new regulations are introduced, or existing ones are changed, small business owners are willing to adapt to ensure compliance. However, with limited staff, time, and financial resources, the effort that it takes for SMEs to meet regulatory demands cannot be understated.

For most small businesses (67%), compliance efforts begin internally (Figure 11). In many cases, they rely on the CFIA’s online operational guidance documents (53%).<sup>viii</sup> However, these resources can be dense, confusing, and filled with technical language, forcing businesses to dedicate extra time and energy to fully understand CFIA requirements. As a result, nearly two in five business owners (59%) have had to contact the CFIA for clarification. Furthermore, 19% of small business owners have hired consultants or legal experts to help ensure compliance (Figure 11). This suggests that current guidance materials are not meeting the needs of small business users. Having to seek further clarification or hire external help just to navigate CFIA regulations places an undue cost burden on SMEs, particularly those with limited resources.

Evidently, some compliance costs are unavoidable. The goal should be to ensure that these regulations are simplified to be clear, easy to understand and minimally burdensome for small businesses. By simplifying online tools, providing clear examples of what constitutes compliance, and improving customer service, the CFIA will facilitate and improve small business compliance rates with rules administered and enforced by the CFIA.

Figure 11  
Although 67% of business owners implemented solutions internally to comply with CFIA regulations, most still required further guidance



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 217.  
Question: Which of the following steps has your business taken to ensure compliance with the CFIA regulations? (Select all that apply)

The CFIA’s role in facilitating internal trade

CFIB’s latest *The State of Internal Trade: Interprovincial Cooperation Report Card* has found that more progress has been made on removing trade barriers within Canada in the past six months than in eight years since the Canadian Free Trade Agreement (CFTA) was signed.<sup>ix</sup> However, much of the authority to truly and fully remove internal trade barriers still lies with regulatory bodies and government agencies, including the CFIA.

In this context, the CFIA has an important opportunity to facilitate the flow of food-related products across the country. Under current regulations, food products must be federally inspected and licensed to be sold across provincial or territorial borders, even if they have already been approved by a provincial or territorial food safety authority. For many SMEs, accessing federally licensed facilities or achieving federal certification independently is prohibitively expensive, complex, and burdensome. Small business owners have called these regulations “*nebulous*” and “*difficult to interpret*,” with one member sharing that “*it requires a full-time person dedicated to reading and implementing CFIA and Health Canada regulations.*”

Recent pilot programs promoting the internal trade of food products have proven to be successful. The Lloydminster Pilot Program, which allows food businesses in the city that straddles the Saskatchewan-Alberta border to prepare and trade food without having to meet federal internal trade requirements, was made permanent in November 2024 after its initial success. The Ready to Grow program in Ontario, which currently assists ten SMEs to get started in interprovincial trade, signals a willingness by the CFIA to play a critical role on this file. While these initiatives are encouraging, there remains work to be done to reduce red tape and make it easier for food-related small businesses to trade within Canada.

## SMEs’ perception of CFIA services and support

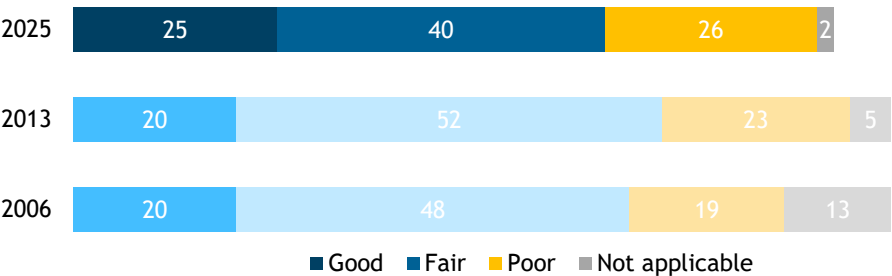
Given the range of responsibilities undertaken by small business owners and the limited capacity they have to handle government paperwork, it is crucial for the CFIA to deliver high-quality service that responds promptly to their requests.

### Overall services

Since the release of CFIB’s 2014 report on the CFIA, the agency has taken steps to improve its client service. One notable initiative is the 2016 launch of *Ask CFIA*, a tool designed to provide businesses with written responses to questions or concerns regarding regulatory requirements.<sup>x</sup> These efforts have led to a modest increase in positive perceptions: the proportion of SMEs rating the CFIA’s overall service as “good” has risen by 5% since 2013 (Figure 12). However, this progress is tempered by other trends. Since 2013, the number of business owners who rate CFIA services as “fair” has declined by 12%, while those reporting “poor” service has increased to 26% (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Increasing share of SMEs rate overall CFIA service as “poor”



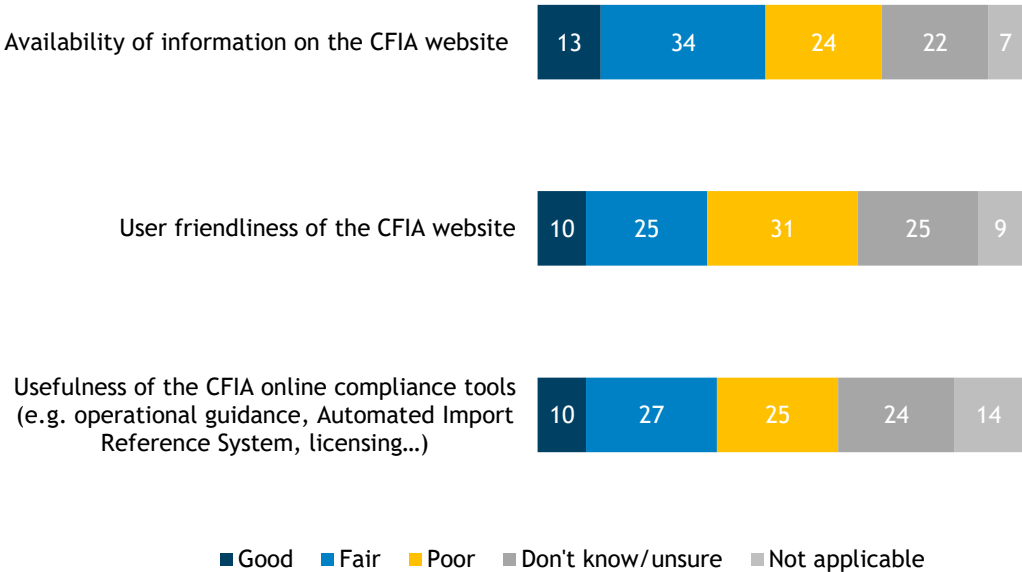
Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 223.  
Question: Please rate the CFIA on each of the following customer service measures. (Select one for each line) | Overall service of the CFIA. Note: “Don’t know/Unsure” responses are not displayed.

Our survey asked SMEs to assess the CFIA’s customer service. These resources significantly influence how small business owners understand and meet their compliance obligations. When regulations are difficult to interpret, frequently changing, or poorly communicated, SMEs are forced to pause daily activities or even hire external experts, making compliance a frustrating and costly process.

### The CFIA’s website

Figure 13

Only 1 in 10 business owners consider the CFIA’s online resources to be “good”



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 222.  
Question: Please rate the CFIA on each of the following customer service measures. (Select one for each line)

The CFIA’s website is often the first place small business owners go to access information about food regulations. Unfortunately, many report that finding the right information remains a significant challenge. Only 13% of business owners rated the availability of information on the CFIA website as “good.” This number remains unchanged from CFIB’s previous survey from over a decade ago (Figure 13).

The CFIA has introduced some helpful tools in recent years, such as the Industry Labelling Tool and an interactive licensing questionnaire.<sup>xi,xii</sup> Still, digital tools are not meeting SME needs, as business owners continue to struggle for answers when faced with more technical or case-specific challenges and questions. Only 10% of business owners consider the CFIA’s website user-friendly, while nearly one-third (31%) rate it as “poor” (Figure 13). Many note that the search function often fails to return relevant results, and key forms or guidance documents are buried in hard-to-find sections.

Even the CFIA’s online compliance tools—intended to support businesses in meeting regulatory obligations—are rated poorly. Only 10% of business owners find them useful, while a quarter (25%) say they are “poor” and 27% deem them “fair” (Figure 13). Business owners consistently report that the CFIA’s online tools are hard to use, largely because resources are not presented in clear, plain language. These findings point to an opportunity to invest in user experience improvements by simplifying language, enhancing the site’s search functionality, and ensuring content is organized in a user-friendly way.

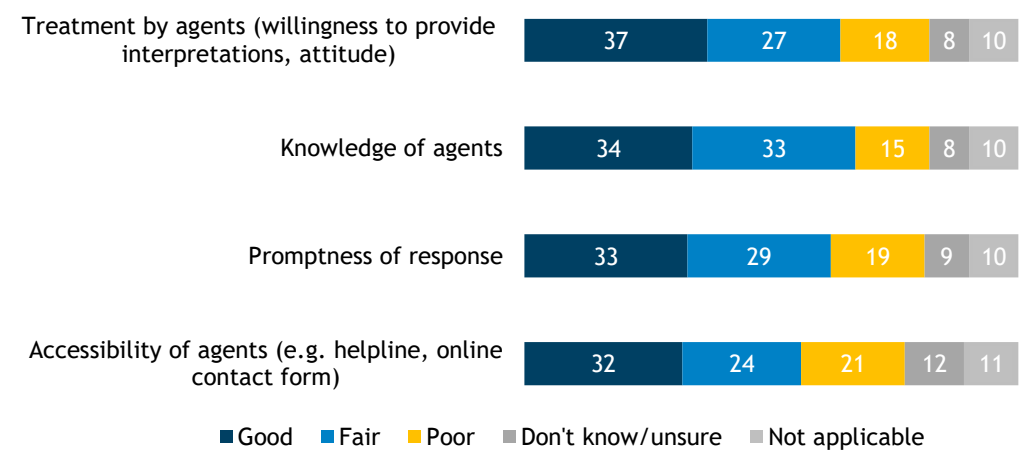
CFIB encourages the CFIA to stay focused on its priority to advance digital tools and services to empower stakeholders.<sup>xiii</sup> In doing so, the CFIA must ensure that regulatory modernization concretely simplifies processes and alleviates the burden on SMEs.

CFIA agents

While many business owners rely on the CFIA website for information, direct interaction with CFIA staff is often necessary for resolving more complex questions. The quality of customer service provided by CFIA staff plays a critical role in helping SMEs understand and comply with regulatory obligations.

We define CFIA agents as staff that engage with business owners as part of their customer service duties, which may include responding to inquiries by phone or email, addressing complaints, and providing information on regulatory requirements. According to the CFIA, its agents are committed to responding to inquiries in a “clear, consistent, professional, and timely manner.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Figure 14  
On average, only one-third of SMEs rate services provided by CFIA agents as “good”



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 226.  
Question: Please rate the CFIA on each of the following customer service measures. (Select one for each line)

When all criteria are considered together, about one-third of business owners rate CFIA agents’ customer service, as “good” (Figure 14). Only 37% report being satisfied with how they are treated by CFIA agents. One business owner in Quebec shared that *“some agents are very incompetent and nonchalant.”* Such interactions have a direct impact on the relationship between the CFIA and its stakeholders. Moreover, only one-third of small businesses are satisfied with the knowledge of agents. This underscores the need to ensure that agents are willing and able to provide clear interpretations and guidance to small business owners.

In fact, it has become increasingly difficult for business owners to access CFIA agents through the helpline and online contact forms: “poor” ratings for agent accessibility (21%) have more than doubled since 2013 (10%). Business owners have described phone wait times as *“atrocious”* and *“absurd”* and 19% shared that CFIA agents do not provide prompt enough responses. In Western provinces, this figure rises to 28%. Ensuring accurate and timely information is being provided to small business owners across Canada is crucial. As an important federal regulatory agency interacting with various sectors across the country, the CFIA’s customer service should be expected to receive good ratings from at least 90% of its users.

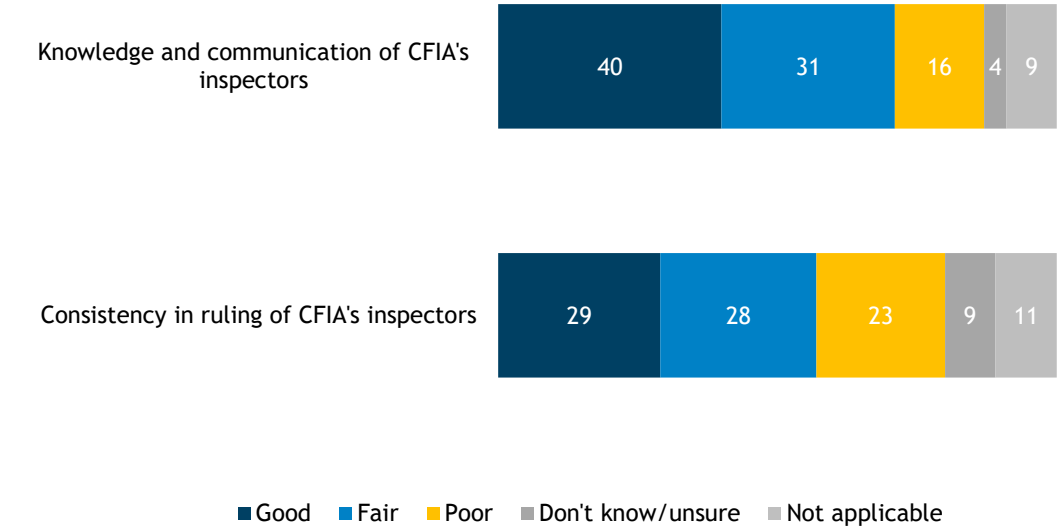
CFIA inspectors

CFIA inspectors interact with small businesses mainly through on-site visits, where they help operators understand food safety requirements, review preventive control plans, and conduct inspections or sampling to ensure regulatory compliance. They may also be involved in audits, recalls, or investigations when food safety issues arise.

Business owners have had mixed experiences with CFIA inspectors. Although it is encouraging to see that CFIA inspectors’ knowledge and communication are the

highest-rated customer service measure (40%), nearly half of business owners find it only “fair” (31%) or “poor” (16%) (Figure 15). Western Canada has the lowest level of satisfaction with CFIA inspectors’ knowledge and communication (33%). These businesses cite a lack of transparency and explanations regarding CFIA inspectors’ decisions, which hinders businesses’ ability to understand rulings and act accordingly.

Figure 15  
1 in 4 small businesses rate the service of CFIA inspectors as “good,” while less than one-third are satisfied with their level of consistency



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 223.  
Question: Please rate the CFIA on each of the following customer service measures.  
For instance, a CFIA inspector informed a business owner in Alberta that he could no longer sell meat scones but did not provide any explanation for the decision.

In an effort to comply with CFIA regulations ahead of the busy holiday season, the business owner pivoted to selling potato scones instead. However, another inspector ordered the business owner to discard the new product, again without offering any clarification. It was only several months later that the business owner learned his supplier was no longer federally licensed. Had this information been clearly communicated by CFIA officials at the outset, the business could have avoided making a second purchase from the same non-compliant supplier and would not have lost approximately \$10,000 in sales.

Consistency of rulings by CFIA inspectors is the customer service element exhibiting the lowest level of satisfaction, with only 29% of business owners citing it as “good.” Nearly a quarter of SMEs (23%)—29% in Quebec—report a lack of consistent rulings by CFIA inspectors. Many SMEs have shared examples of inconsistent decisions between different inspectors, and even from the same inspector across separate inspections (Figure 16). These discrepancies make it difficult for small businesses to plan and ensure regulatory compliance.

Figure 16

**Our members’ comments on CFIA inspectors**

“Not consistent in implementing regulations from inspector to inspector or inspection to inspection. Poor interpretation of the regulations from different inspectors, and supervisors getting involved when they don’t really know the situation on the ground.”

Food and Beverage Product Processing, MB

“When an inspector is asked a question, he or she should be able to give a clear and precise answer quickly. This is rarely the case. Inspectors must constantly refer to their superiors, which can delay a company's operations if it wants to be 100% compliant with the CFIA.”

Food and Beverage Product Processing, QC

“The consistency of applying inspection decisions varies from port to port across the country, causing surprise shipment issues during our busiest shipping periods that are hard to manage. Our perishable goods end up being delayed and ultimately become garbage.”

Wholesale and Supply for Agriculture, ON

“The inspectors are good at the job but their hands are tied with the regulations and policies that they have to enforce.”

Food and Beverage Retail and Hospitality, ON

“We are audited twice a year and we have no issues with the inspectors we have worked with. They are fair, explain well during discussions, and are timely in their reports. Once you have your program set up, which takes time, it is easy to maintain and update on a regular basis to ensure you stay compliant with all regulations.”

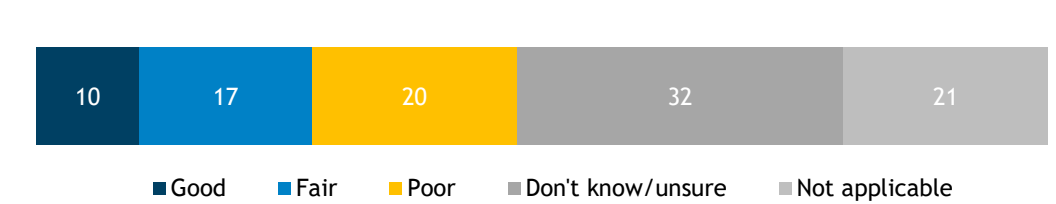
Fruit, Vegetables and Horticultural Specialties, ON

Appeals

The CFIA can build trust with business owners through a fair and transparent complaints and appeals process. The CFIA’s Complaints and Appeals Office, created in 2012, allows businesses to register service-related concerns or dispute regulatory decisions.<sup>xv</sup> Among all CFIA resources and communication tools surveyed, the complaints and appeals process stands out for its low awareness and usage, as reflected by the highest share of “Don’t know/Unsure” (32%) responses. Only 10% consider the process fair and transparent while 20% find it “poor” (Figure 17).

Business owners who have submitted complaints or appeals to the Office expressed frustration with long processing times and inadequate, and sometimes nonexistent, communication. Some question the impartiality of the process, since it involves the agency reviewing its own decisions. Additionally, CFIB is concerned that some members may avoid filing complaints for fear it could trigger a lengthy inspection or audit—suggesting a lack of trust in the system’s neutrality and effectiveness. These findings underscore the importance of improving the accessibility, credibility, and awareness of these mechanisms.

Figure 17  
Only 10% of SMEs find the complaints and appeals process fair and transparent



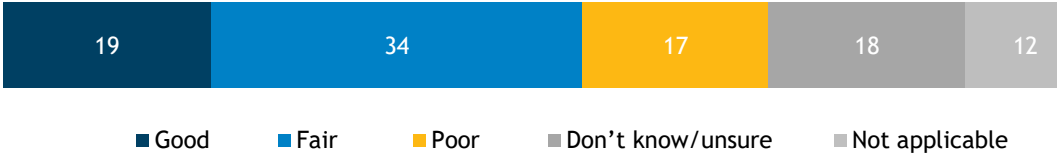
Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 222.  
Question: Please rate the CFIA on each of the following customer service measures (Select one for each line) | Fairness and transparency of the CFIA complaint and appeal process.

Fees

Only one in five (19%) business owners rate fee levels as “good” and 34% as “fair” (Figure 18). Businesses in the agriculture sector are more likely to be satisfied with the fairness of fee levels (27%). However, only 11% of SMEs in the manufacturing sector and 9% of small retail businesses rate the fairness of fee levels as “good.”

The SCFR introduced changes to make the fee structure more predictable for business owners, such as annually adjusted fees tied to inflation and the extension of licence validity from one year to two. While these changes are welcome, many small businesses still complain about the high costs of CFIA licences—which can also appear as a barrier to entry for small businesses interested in becoming federally licensed. Given the amount SMEs pay in fees, they reasonably expect the services provided by the CFIA to be clear, efficient, and useful, and to adequately meet their needs.

Figure 18  
Only 19% of SMEs think the fairness of fee levels is “good,” even less among manufacturing and retail businesses



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 224.  
Question: Please rate the CFIA on each of the following customer service measures (Select one for each line) | Fairness of fee levels

## Conclusion & recommendations

The new federal government promised during the election campaign to amend the mandate of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to ensure that food security and affordability are key considerations in all regulatory decisions, without compromising health and safety. CFIB welcomes the recognition of the need to modernize and streamline the CFIA’s regulatory decisions. Now, the federal government must uphold its promise and make CFIA regulatory modernization a clear policy priority. This means driving concrete and measurable red tape reductions that deliver tangible improvements for SMEs.

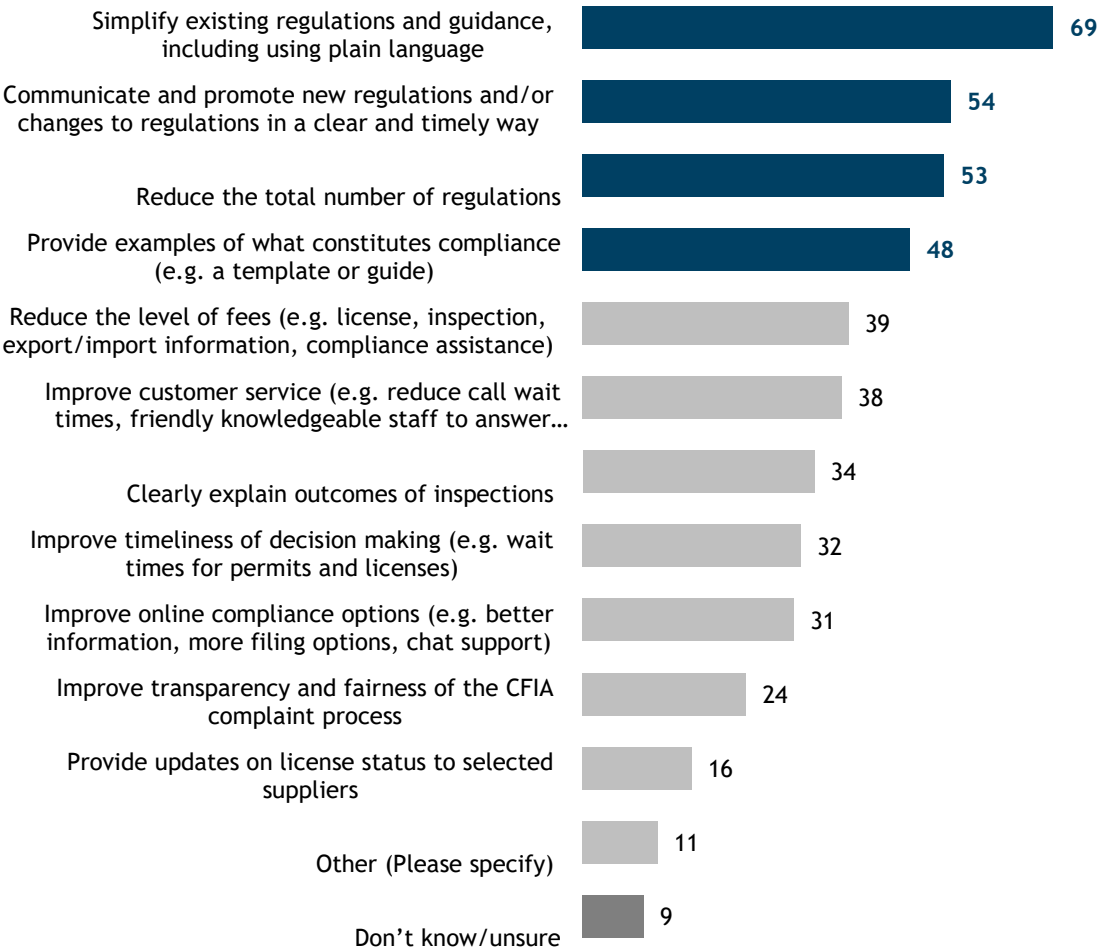
It is essential that the CFIA more effectively align its processes with the practical realities of SMEs by reducing unnecessary regulatory burden and improving the quality of customer service. The costs associated with compliance are frequently passed on to consumers, ultimately contributing to higher food prices. A more balanced and responsive regulatory framework will support both a competitive business environment and greater food affordability, and safety for Canadians.

CFIB recommends the CFIA and policy makers take the following measures:

**1) Expand the scope of the Administrative Burden Baseline to include legislation, policies, and guidelines**

The CFIA’s Administrative Burden Baseline, which measures regulatory requirements, is a good first step in holding the agency accountable for the burden it imposes.<sup>xvi</sup> However, it should go further and include requirements found in legislations, policies, and guidelines. Moreover, certain regulatory requirements are excluded. For instance, situational regulatory requirements like the Compensation for Destroyed Animals Regulations are listed as 0. Yet affected businesses must complete several forms to receive compensation.

Figure 19  
**Business owners’ recommendations to improve the CFIA’s customer service and reduce its regulatory burden**



Source: CFIB, Canadian Food Inspection Agency Survey - January-February 2025, n = 216.  
Question: What would make it easier for your business to comply with the CFIA regulations? (Select all that apply)

## **2) Reduce the total regulations by implementing a “2-for-1” rule**

CFIB has been calling on the federal government and agencies to adopt a “2-for-1” approach, requiring the removal of two existing regulatory requirements for every new one introduced, along with clear justification for both new and existing rules. All new legislation, policies, rules, and regulations should be subject to scrutiny, including evaluating if they are necessary, proactively consulting stakeholders, considering unintended impacts, explaining why alternatives to regulations would not work, and establishing a clear plan for future review.

## **3) Simplify existing regulations and guidance**

It is entirely reasonable for business owners to expect the CFIA and all government agencies and departments to present rules and requirements in a clear, accessible, and user-friendly manner. This includes using plain language and streamlining processes so that SMEs can more easily understand and meet food safety requirements. This may also include more flexibility around compliance for smaller businesses in recognition of their more limited capacity to quickly adapt to new rules or processes.

## **4) Communicate and promote changes to regulations or new regulations in a clear and timely way**

Small business owners cannot comply with rules they are unaware of. Effective communication is essential to avoid confusion, improve compliance rates, and foster trust between the CFIA and the agri-food sector. This means using plain language and avoiding jargon, promoting regulatory changes on social media or the radio, sending timely mail

alerts, and ensuring CFIA inspectors and agents share updates with businesses they encounter.

## **5) Provide clear examples of what constitutes compliance**

The CFIA should provide guidelines and examples of what constitutes compliance. This is key for small businesses that do not typically have the capacity to navigate complex requirements and evaluate and implement cost-efficient ways to comply. This is particularly important for business owners in retail (63%) and manufacturing (62%).

## **6) Reduce fee levels to make regulatory compliance accessible to SMEs**

While businesses understand that some fees may be necessary, the costs associated with licences, inspections, trade documentation, and compliance assistance place a disproportionate burden on SMEs, as they often lack the resources to absorb these additional costs. The CFIA’s fee structure should be modified based on the size of a business to ensure that regulatory compliance is financially accessible for SMEs.

## **7) Improve customer service**

Small business owners need timely, accurate, and easily digestible support to navigate complex regulatory requirements. Over one-third of members (38%) believe that improving customer service by reducing response times and ensuring staff are friendly, knowledgeable, and equipped to provide clear guidance would make it easier for their business to comply with CFIA regulations. The CFIA should also have stricter service standards. For example, businesses currently wait up to 20 business days for answers to regulatory or policy interpretation questions.<sup>xvii</sup>

## 8) Improve online tools

While CFIB is pleased to see that advancing digital tools and services is a priority under the CFIA's 2025 stakeholder empowerment plan, any new digital progress must concretely reduce the burden on SMEs. In addition to improving the CFIA website's organization and availability of information, the agency could allow businesses to submit government forms through software they already use, such as tax or payroll programs. Furthermore, additional filing options and better chat support would be very helpful to SMEs seeking compliance information online.

## 9) Clearly explain outcomes of inspections, adopt an education over enforcement approach

Inspectors play a key role in bridging the gap between CFIA regulations and how they apply to business owners' operations. They should raise awareness about regulations and facilitate compliance for business owners. As such, when identifying non-compliance with regulations enforced by the CFIA, inspectors should provide clear explanations and educate business owners on the specific rules they have violated, enabling them to make necessary changes to adequately comply.

## 10) Improve timeliness of decision-making

Business owners are often required to meet strict compliance and paperwork deadlines, yet regulators typically face no equivalent timelines for issuing decisions or approving permits. There should be high service standards and ways to hold the CFIA accountable when those deadlines are not met. Reducing wait times would send a signal that the CFIA understands that SMEs need quick decisions to effectively compete.

## 11) Improve the transparency and fairness of the CFIA complaints process

The CFIA should raise awareness of its complaint process, make it more accessible, and ensure timely resolution. To foster trust with small business owners and enhance transparency, the CFIA should clearly explain the reasoning behind a resolution and commit to adjustments when recurring issues are identified.

## 12) Improve awareness of tools tracking suppliers' licence status updates

Currently, when the CFIA cancels a supplier's licence, they update the supplier's status on official registries and lists managed by the National Centre for Permissions.<sup>xviii</sup> To improve compliance, the CFIA should raise awareness about the Safe Food for Canadians Licence Registry and the suspensions and cancellations webpage.<sup>xix,xx</sup>

## 13) Facilitate internal trade of food products

The federal government should work with provinces and territories to break down internal trade barriers, including the expansion of successful pilot programs like the Lloydminster Pilot Program and the Ready to Grow program. Given concerns about traceability in this context, the CFIA should work collaboratively with provincial and territorial authorities to develop solutions that enable the tracking of provincially inspected interjurisdictional food products to ensure safety and quality standards. Furthermore, the CFIA must recognize other jurisdictions' expertise through mutual recognition to reduce the regulatory burden of obtaining a federal inspection for the trade of food products within Canada. This would help facilitate internal trade and ensure there is less of a burden on SMEs looking to expand across provincial borders.

## Appendix: Industry-specific member comments on the CFIA

“The PEI oyster industry has had an enormously frustrating history with the CFIA. We are highly regulated, specifically when it comes to Vibrio in oysters. To make a very long story short: our testing threshold is 100 times (!! ) stricter than the US FDA's testing limit. Yet, the CFIA allows American oysters to cross into Canada every day. Our industry group has reached out to Health Canada and the CFIA to work with us on this and we have received zero cooperation (won't even answer questions). We asked the FDA similar questions and received answers in 9 days. So, we get better service from the American regulators...”

Food and Beverage Retail and Hospitality, PEI

“Overall, we are satisfied, but feel that the regulations are not really adapted to the artisanal processing sector.”

Food and Beverage Product Processing, QC

“Fitness of animals shipped to auction or slaughter houses is really ambiguous. Much clarification needed.”

Livestock and Animal Specialty Farms, ON

“The CFIA is an integral part of the plant movement business and helps keep invasive species out of our province and protects our farm. We appreciate all that the CFIA does to keep our industry safe and thriving.”

Fruit, Vegetables, and Horticultural Specialties, NS

“The hatchery regulation is very burdensome and was designed for industrial hatcheries. For small farmers, this regulation is ill-suited and creates unnecessary administrative burden. The egg incubation capacity threshold should be raised to exempt small businesses from a regulation intended for large operations.”

Livestock and Animal Specialty Farms, QC

“We are honey producers and the CFIA has allowed adulterated honey to be packed in Canada and to compete on the store shelf against our natural honey. They also totally control the growth of the bee industry by means of closed border importation of packaged bees from the continental USA. We are crop pollinators that travel to the lower mainland every spring. The US colonies are stacked at the border (on the US side) for pollination in Washington State. Please tell me how they keep those bees out of our country.”

Agriculture Services, AB

Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, Key Business Statistics 2024, 2025. Accessed in September 2025: <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/key-small-business-statistics/key-small-business-statistics-2024#s2.2>

<sup>ii</sup> CFIB, Business Barometer, Retrospective 2024, December 2024.

<sup>iii</sup> CFIB, Regulations and Paper Burden Survey, 2024, n = 2,230.

<sup>iv</sup> CFIB data from 2024 reveals that red tape accounts for nearly \$18 billion (35%) of the combined cost of regulation from all three levels of government for Canadian businesses (\$51 billion).

<sup>v</sup> CFIB, Canada’s red tape report: The cost of regulation to small business. 7<sup>th</sup> edition, January 2025.

<sup>vi</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Mandate, 2019. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/about-cfia/organizational-structure/mandate>

<sup>vii</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Understanding the Safe Food for Canadians Regulations: A handbook for food businesses, Why change, 2023. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/food-safety-industry/toolkit-food-businesses/sfcr-handbook-food-businesses>

<sup>viii</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Operational guideline: Food regulatory response guidelines, 2025. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/inspection-and-enforcement/guidance-food-activities/regulatory-response/food-guidelines>

<sup>ix</sup> CFIB, The State of Internal Trade: Canada’s Interprovincial Cooperation Report Card, June 2025.

<sup>x</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Ask CFIA, 2023. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/about-cfia/contact-us/ask-cfia>

<sup>xi</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Food Labelling for industry, 2025. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/inspection-and-enforcement/guidance-food-activities/regulatory-response/food-licence>

<sup>xii</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Licensing interactive tool - Safe Food for Canadians Regulations. Accessed in September 2025: [https://ca1se.voxco.com/SE/93/SFCR\\_licence/?&lang=en](https://ca1se.voxco.com/SE/93/SFCR_licence/?&lang=en)

<sup>xiii</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, CFIA 2025: Building for the future, 2021. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/about-cfia/cfia-2025>

<sup>xiv</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, CFIA’s Policy for Providing Guidance on Regulatory Requirements, 2019. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/about-cfia/acts-and-regulations/policy-providing-guidance-regulatory-require>

<sup>xv</sup> Government of Canada, The CFIA’s New Complaints and Appeals Office is Operational, 2012. Accessed in September 2025: <https://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2012/04/cfia-new-complaints-appeals-office-operational.html>

<sup>xvi</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Administrative Burden Baseline: Update 2024. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/about-cfia/acts-and-regulations/administrative-burden-baseline>

<sup>xvii</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Contact CFIA online. Accessed in September 2025: <https://active.inspection.gc.ca/netapp/contactus/contactuse.aspx>

<sup>xviii</sup> Government of Canada, Procedures for suspending and lifting the suspension of a Safe food for Canadians licence, 2024. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/inspection-and-enforcement/guidance-food-activities/regulatory-response/food-licence>

<sup>xix</sup> Government of Canada, Safe Food for Canadians Licence Registry, 2025. Accessed in September 2025: <https://apps.inspection.canada.ca/webapps/foodlicenceregistry/en/>

<sup>xx</sup> Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Suspensions and cancellations, 2025. Accessed in September 2025: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/inspection-and-enforcement/actions-taken/licences>

About CFIB

CFIB is a non-partisan organization exclusively representing the interests of 100,000 small and medium-sized businesses in Canada. CFIB’s research capacity is second-to-none because it is able to gather timely and concrete information from members about business issues that affect their day-to-day operation and bottom line. In this capacity, CFIB is an excellent source of up-to-date information for governments to consider when developing policies impacting Canada’s small business community.

To learn more, visit [cfib.ca](https://cfib.ca).

Additional resources

Questions or data requests  
[research@cfib.ca](mailto:research@cfib.ca)

All CFIB research  
[cfib.ca/research](https://cfib.ca/research)

X  
[@CFIB\\_FCEI\\_Stats](https://twitter.com/CFIB_FCEI_Stats)

Authors



Juliette Nicolaÿ is a Policy Analyst in Ottawa

Links to: [Full bio](#) [LinkedIn](#)



Béatrice Moen is a Public Policy and Advocacy Intern in Ottawa

Link to: [LinkedIn](#)

