

FOOD SAFETY AND INSPECTION SERVICE  
Statement of  
Alfred Almanza, Administrator  
Before the  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,  
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Farr, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Alfred Almanza, Administrator of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the status of the Agency's work to ensure the safety of meat, poultry, and processed egg products and to prevent foodborne illness.

During the last Congress, Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Elisabeth Hagen testified before this Subcommittee about the FSIS Strategic Plan, which details our goals for FY 2011-2016. I'd like to highlight some of our progress, but first, I'd like to talk about who we are and what we do.

Who We Are

FSIS is the public health agency in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) responsible for ensuring that the nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products, whether domestic or imported, is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged.

The dedicated men and women of FSIS all across the nation are vital to carrying out our mission. Of the 9,750 people that FSIS employed at the end of FY 2012, 8,678 of them were on the front lines protecting public health in 6,263 federally regulated establishments, in one of the three FSIS laboratories, at approximately 120 ports of entry, and in 150,000 in-commerce facilities nationwide.

## What We Do

### *Federal Inspection of Domestic Products*

Our mission is unique because much of it is mandated by law. FSIS enforces the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) and the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA), which require the examination and inspection of all livestock (cattle, sheep, swine, goats, horses, mules, other equines) and poultry (domesticated birds, defined in our regulations as chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, guineas, ratites or squabs) slaughtered and processed for use in commerce for human food, with few exceptions. FSIS also enforces the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA), which requires that livestock be handled and slaughtered humanely. Livestock and poultry slaughter operations cannot operate without the presence of inspection personnel, and inspection personnel must also be present at least once-per-shift per day for meat and poultry processing operations. During fiscal year (FY) 2012, FSIS personnel inspected about 147 million head of livestock and 8.9 billion birds at slaughter establishments nationwide.

Under the Egg Products Inspection Act, FSIS also inspects processed egg products, which are primarily used as ingredients in other foods, such as prepared mayonnaise and ice cream, and by the food service industry, including hospitals and schools. During FY 2012, FSIS personnel inspected about 4 billion pounds of processed egg products.

### *Federal Inspection of Imported Products*

FSIS also regulates all imports of meat, poultry, and processed egg products intended for use as human food. In fact, before imports of FSIS-regulated products are allowed, FSIS establishes the initial equivalence of every exporting country's food safety regulatory system, on a product-by-product basis.

Once a foreign food safety system is determined to be equivalent, FSIS inspects all meat, poultry, and processed egg products from that country at U.S. ports of entry. During FY 2012, FSIS personnel inspected approximately 3.1 billion pounds of meat and poultry products presented for import by 29 actively exporting foreign countries, and approximately 15.6 million pounds of processed egg products presented for import from Canada.

FSIS also conducts audits of the food safety systems of exporting countries to make sure that they continue to provide a level of food safety equivalent to the U.S. system.

The Agency evaluates foreign inspection systems on an annual basis and performs its annual verification by reviewing any changes in the foreign country's food safety system and the country's performance in port-of-entry inspections. Based on these reviews, the Agency decides whether it can conclude that the country is maintaining equivalence, or whether additional Agency action is warranted. This performance-based approach allows FSIS to direct its resources to foreign food regulatory systems that potentially pose a risk to public health; make its international program more consistent with its domestic inspection system; and improve the linkage between port of entry re-inspection and on-site audits. During FY 2012, FSIS conducted on-site audits of 11 countries that are eligible to export meat, poultry and egg products to the United States and identified no significant equivalence concerns.

#### *Cooperative State Inspection*

Under authorities provided by the FMIA and PPIA, FSIS also ensures the safety of State-inspected meat and poultry products through cooperative agreements with State departments of agriculture.

FSIS cooperates with 27 States to develop and administer State meat and poultry inspection programs that enforce food safety requirements that are "at least equal to" Federal requirements at about 1,700 establishments. These establishments can only ship or sell products within their State.

FSIS also cooperates with three States – Ohio, North Dakota, and Wisconsin – to operate interstate shipment programs. FSIS signed its first cooperative interstate shipment agreement with Ohio on August 8, 2012, marking the implementation of Section 11015 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008. FSIS also signed agreements with North Dakota and Wisconsin, on January 11 and 14, 2013, respectively. For the first time, under these agreements, four Ohio establishments and one North Dakota establishment have been able to ship their products across State lines and nationwide. The Ohio and North Dakota departments of

agriculture enforce food safety requirements that are the same as Federal requirements and apply Federal marks of inspection at these establishments. No Wisconsin establishments have been selected yet to ship interstate under its program.

### Modernization

FSIS continues to meet our statutory obligations, but we are constantly asking ourselves how we can better protect consumers. I began my career at FSIS as a food inspector in a small slaughter plant in Texas nearly 35 years ago, and as Administrator, I have taken what I learned in the field and used that knowledge to shape innovations that are reducing the risk of foodborne illness from meat and poultry.

### *Improving Food Safety*

As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in January, comparing 2011 with the 2006-2008 baseline, the incidence of foodborne infections associated with key pathogens has decreased in some cases and increased in others. For example, although the incidence of infection was 26 percent lower for *E. coli* O157, it was 14 percent higher for *Campylobacter* and did not change significantly for *Salmonella*.

Since FSIS began measuring all illnesses from FSIS-regulated products, our *Salmonella* illness estimates have mirrored the stagnant CDC incidence, despite FSIS interventions. As long as people continue to get sick from food, we must ensure that our inspection activities align with food safety risks.

That is one reason why on January 20, 2012, we announced a proposed rule that would modernize the poultry slaughter inspection system by focusing inspection on areas of poultry production that will have the biggest impact on public health. The proposed system would build on the food safety improvements we made in 1998, when FSIS began verifying that the industry is identifying and controlling pathogens through Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) plans. Currently, FSIS in-plant personnel perform quality assurance tasks such as looking for visible defects, but they can't detect invisible pathogens and microbes this way. Therefore, in establishments that choose to operate under this proposed new inspection system,

FSIS would focus on critical food safety tasks, such as pathogen testing and verifying HACCP and sanitation standard operating procedures, and the quality assurance tasks would be turned over to the company. FSIS would continue to inspect every carcass. We estimate that the new poultry inspection system would avert about 5,000 foodborne illnesses from *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* annually.

In the meantime, we have already made major strides toward reducing the incidence of foodborne illness. For example, to stay ahead of emerging risk and trends with *Salmonella*, FSIS has established a Strategic Performance Working Group, and its first series of meetings were dedicated to identifying potential interventions or actions to decrease FSIS-attributable Salmonellosis.

On June 4, 2012, FSIS began testing for six serogroups of Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* – O26, O103, O45, O111, O121 and O145 – in addition to O157:H7. Between January 1 and March 6, 2013, for example, FSIS tested 575 samples of domestic and imported raw ground beef components for non-O157 *E. coli*, and only two of them were positive, both for *E. coli* O103.

Also just last month, we implemented our “hold and test” policy, which means that since February 8, meat and poultry establishments have held FSIS-sampled product from commerce until the test results have come back negative. This new policy will help to prevent meat and poultry products that test positive for dangerous pathogens from reaching store shelves or consumers’ tables. FSIS calculates that if this new requirement had been in place between 2007 through 2010, nearly 20 percent of the meat and poultry recalls that occurred during that time would have been prevented, because the product would not have been released into commerce in the first place.

#### *Better Ensuring Humane Handling*

In addition to improving food safety, the Agency is also dedicated to ensuring that livestock are handled humanely throughout the slaughter process. FSIS ensures this through consistent, effective enforcement of the HMSA. We are continually implementing new measures to improve FSIS verification and enforcement of Federal humane handling laws.

One of the Agency's Strategic Plan goals is to ensure that by FY 2016, 50 percent of livestock slaughter establishments have an effective, systematic approach to humane handling. We are on track, and I can report that as of September 30, 2012, 42 percent of livestock slaughter establishments had developed systematic approaches to humane handling verified by FSIS.

We are also happy to report that USDA welcomed the first Humane Handling Ombudsman in July 2012. The Department-level Ombudsman serves as a neutral party, independent of FSIS, to whom FSIS field personnel and other stakeholders can report humane handling concerns when the standard reporting mechanisms do not adequately address outstanding issues. USDA has published a fact sheet about the Ombudsman and how to report concerns at:

[http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact\\_Sheets/Humane\\_Handling\\_Ombudsman/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Humane_Handling_Ombudsman/index.asp).

### Targeting Resources

We live in a time when everyone in government must do more with less. In addition to looking at how we can carry out our food safety mission more effectively, we must do everything in our power to be good stewards of taxpayer money. We know that there is more to be done and FSIS continues looking for ways to improve, innovate, and modernize, while targeting resources where they can be most effective.

For example, we estimated that the previously mentioned modernization of poultry slaughter inspection would save taxpayers approximately \$90 million over a three-year period after implementation begins. FSIS also believes that participating establishments will see increased productivity and lower production costs of about \$250 million per year. Thus, industry will be able to reduce the end-price of poultry for consumers.

Moreover, on October 1, 2012, FSIS consolidated its 15 district offices into 10. The consolidation integrated our administrative field staff and improved mission consistency by more evenly distributing the circuits, establishments, and FSIS employees that each district office oversees, while maintaining the same level of inspection in FSIS-regulated establishments.

## Leveraging Resources

While our primary focus is preventing foodborne illness by making sure that industry produces safe food, we are constantly looking for other ways to improve the food safety system, with the help of our food safety partners and by educating consumers.

### *Government and Stakeholder Partnerships*

FSIS has no regulatory authority over what happens before livestock and poultry reach the slaughterhouse gate, but when a consumer is eating a hamburger, they shouldn't need to worry about who regulates what, and when. They just need to know that it's safe to eat.

We understand that everything we do at FSIS is affected by what happens before animals are brought to slaughter, and that is why we are working with our food safety partners across the farm-to-table continuum to ensure that food is safe. We have met with our partners inside and outside of USDA to talk about ways that we can promote good pre-harvest practices that will reduce the likelihood of contamination at slaughter. For example, on November 9, 2011, FSIS held a joint public meeting with USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Agricultural Research Service on "Pre-Harvest Food Safety for Cattle," and discussed how pre-harvest pathogen control strategies for animals presented for slaughter can reduce the likelihood that beef could become contaminated with *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, and other pathogens.

We also work with our Federal food safety partners to share food safety expertise and prevent duplication. For example, in January 2012, USDA and FDA signed a memorandum of understanding, in which we committed to sharing information we have collected related to foodborne pathogens, contaminants, and illnesses. That same month, FSIS, FDA, and CDC hosted a joint public meeting to discuss Federal efforts to advance tri-agency understanding of food source attribution and develop harmonized food source attribution estimates to inform targeted food safety strategies. The public meeting also introduced the Interagency Food Safety Analytics Collaboration, which was formed to collaborate on analytic projects.

So while FSIS is doing its part to measure illnesses attributed to FSIS-regulated products, we are also aware that the products we regulate are only one piece of the food safety puzzle. We are all

tasked with reducing foodborne illnesses, and we are working to combat the sources of these illnesses, no matter where they are and who regulates them.

### *Consumer Outreach*

In addition to doing everything we can to make sure that food is safe before it gets to the store shelves, we feel it is also our responsibility to give consumers the tools that they need to handle food safely at home.

That's why FSIS, CDC, and FDA teamed up with the Ad Council to launch a national public service campaign called *Food Safe Families*. The *Food Safe Families* campaign utilized national TV, radio, and print ads – created pro bono by the ad agency JWT New York – to educate consumers about the risks of foodborne illness and how to prevent it. The campaign has had a big impact for a minimal investment, especially when you consider the costs of foodborne illness – whether in terms of lost job productivity or the costs of health care. For an investment of approximately \$2.8 million, the Ad Council has been able to run a campaign worth an estimated \$46 million through donated media, resulting in exponential growth of our consumer education efforts.

To better reach consumers on their terms and ensure that our food safety messages are better received by a larger audience, FSIS also utilizes various social and new media to reach out about key food safety messages, such as recalls and safe food handling practices. FSIS actively disseminates food safety messages through Twitter, Facebook, Blogs, and YouTube.

The number of visitors to the virtual food safety expert, Ask Karen, nearly tripled in FY 2012, growing from 444,000 answers viewed in FY 2011 to more than 1.1 million answers viewed in FY 2012. FSIS attributes this in large part to converting its Ask Karen webpage into a smart phone application in the third quarter of FY 2011 and continued promotion through FY 2012. In March 2012, Federal Computer Week recognized FSIS with a Fed 100 Award for playing a pivotal role through Ask Karen in the Federal IT community.

On March 6, 2012, FSIS launched Twitter feeds for each State and U.S. territory that provide tailored food safety alerts to consumers. Followers of these Twitter accounts receive alerts about meat and poultry recalls in their area, as well as information on how to protect the safety of their food during severe weather events.

The @USDAFoodSafety Twitter account had 332,600 followers at the end of FY 2012, representing a 66 percent increase over FY 2011. We are currently able to reach more than 390,000 followers with each tweet we send, and that number grows by about 2,000 weekly.

FSIS hosted four Twitter chats during FY 2012, including one for Thanksgiving, one for Independence Day and summer grilling, one on food safety “myth busters” during National Food Safety Education Month, and a chat with Under Secretary Hagen as part of the Department’s virtual office hours series.

More and more, we are using mobile technology to reach consumers where they are, whether they are at the grocery store, in the kitchen, or at the grill. Not only does the messaging reach more consumers; it requires fewer staff hours to operate than a hotline or a website.

### Conclusion

We are continually looking at the FSIS organization and asking ourselves if this is the best we can do and if this is the most efficient way that we can do it. Government can deliver more than people expect, and FSIS is committed to doing so.

We are one team, with one purpose, working toward a common and extremely important goal. I am proud to lead such a committed workforce in its noble public health mission.

Thank you for the opportunity to report on the status of FSIS programs, and to talk about the important work that our employees do every day to protect public health.