

FOOD SAFETY
Statement of
Dr. Elisabeth Hagen, Under Secretary for Food Safety
Before the
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Blunt, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Dr. Elisabeth Hagen, Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

I am pleased to appear before you today in support of the President's fiscal year (FY) 2014 budget request for USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and to discuss the status of FSIS programs. The President's FY 2014 budget request for FSIS includes slightly more than \$1 billion in appropriated funding. This funding level ensures that we remain capable of performing our vital regulatory mission to ensure the safety of meat, poultry and processed egg products. The notable changes in the FY 2014 budget request include initial estimated savings from transition to the modernized poultry inspection system and sufficient funding to continue implementation of the Cooperative Interstate Shipment program.

Who We Are

FSIS is USDA's public health agency and is 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

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 and poultry 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 FY 2012, FSIS personnel inspected about 147 million head of livestock and 8.9 billion birds at slaughter establishments nationwide.

In addition, under the Egg Products Inspection Act, FSIS 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.

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.

In addition, FSIS cooperates with 27 States to develop and administer State meat and poultry inspection (MPI) 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 has also entered into cooperative interstate shipment agreements with three States – Ohio, North Dakota, and Wisconsin. FSIS signed its first agreement with Ohio on August 8, 2012, marking the implementation of Section 11015 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008. FSIS signed agreements with North Dakota and Wisconsin on January 11 and 14, 2013, respectively.

Preventing Foodborne Illness

In addition to meeting our statutory obligations, we are constantly looking for ways to better protect American consumers from foodborne illnesses and evolve our methods to address modern food safety challenges.

In September 2011, FSIS unveiled its Strategic Plan for FY 2011 through FY 2016, outlining strategies and measurable goals to reduce foodborne illness. Since then we have taken a number of very significant steps toward accomplishing these goals, which I'm proud to share with you today.

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 June 4, 2012, and April 29, 2013, FSIS tested 3,531 samples of domestic and imported raw ground beef components for non-O157 *E. coli*, and found 50 of those samples to be positive.

Also, on February 8, we implemented our “hold and test” policy, which means that since then, 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.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) most recent Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network (FoodNet) data shows that since the 1996-1998 baseline was established, significant headway has been made in reducing the incidence of foodborne infection caused by pathogens often associated with FSIS-regulated food. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for illnesses caused by *Salmonella*.

Salmonella

Our estimates of illnesses caused by *Salmonella* from FSIS-regulated products mirror this trend, despite recent interventions and significant improvement in contamination rates measured by our verification testing. Reducing illnesses due to *Salmonella* remains a top priority for FSIS. As long as people continue to get sick from food, we must ensure that our inspection activities align with food safety risks. A multi-faceted effort will be necessary in order to achieve reductions in *Salmonella* rates.

This past December, we advised establishments that produce ground and comminuted poultry products that they needed to reassess their Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) plans in light of recent developments that could affect how they analyze the hazards the products present. Companies producing raw ground or comminuted poultry products will be required in their reassessments to account for several *Salmonella* outbreaks that were associated with those types of products over the past few years. This reassessment will increase the likelihood that the establishments will effectively address the hazards these products present and thus better prevent foodborne illness.

We have also finalized a raw chicken parts baseline that targets reducing *Salmonella* rates in other poultry products. This microbiological baseline study provides us with important data on the prevalence and quantitative levels of certain foodborne pathogens, such as *Salmonella*, and other microorganisms.

To stay ahead of emerging risk and trends with *Salmonella*, FSIS has charged its newly established Strategic Performance Working Group with identifying potential interventions or actions to decrease FSIS-attributable Salmonellosis.

Modernization to Improve Food Safety

Another important method for preventing *Salmonella* illnesses is to align inspection with risk by modernizing poultry slaughter inspection, which is why we announced a proposed rule that would focus inspection on areas of poultry production with the biggest impact on public health. Currently, FSIS in-plant personnel perform quality assurance tasks such as looking for visible

defects, but they are unable to detect invisible pathogens and microbes this way. Therefore, 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, as required by law. We estimate that the new poultry inspection system would prevent at least 5,000 illnesses from *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* each year.

The need for modernizing our food safety system is evident. As pathogens evolve, and as our scientific knowledge of what causes foodborne illness improves, we must ensure that our food safety system and our inspection process responds to these challenges. Scientific assumptions that were applied in the 1950s, when the Poultry Products Inspection Act was first enacted, are outdated, so we must ensure that our regulatory tools correspond with current knowledge.

This is why modernizing the poultry inspection system is so important. Updating our approach would help the Agency prevent foodborne illness more effectively and efficiently.

The implementation of the Public Health Information System (PHIS) also provides us with another important decision-making tool to enable us to protect public health more effectively, efficiently, and rapidly. This web-based system integrates our data sources to support a comprehensive, timely and reliable data-driven approach to inspection. This approach allows FSIS to identify food safety threats and emerging trends more rapidly and accurately. In January 2012, FSIS completed a full implementation of the domestic component of the system, and we began implementation of the import component in spring 2012. In addition, FSIS completed a staggered implementation of PHIS to industry users last month and began implementation of the system to State MPI programs, which is expected to be completed by the end of this year.

Until we can ensure that no contaminated product is ever released into commerce, we must also align our in-commerce activities, such as traceback investigations, with risks. For example, FSIS is developing a proposed rule to require retail operations to maintain accurate grinding records of source materials and particular practices, which would greatly improve the Agency's ability to trace products from retail back to slaughter facilities.

Targeting Resources

In addition to improving food safety, we must be good stewards of taxpayer money, and that is why FSIS continues to examine ways to target resources where they can be most effective.

For example, we estimate that the previously mentioned modernization of poultry slaughter inspection would save taxpayers approximately \$90 million over a three-year period upon full implementation. FSIS also believes that participating establishments will see lower production costs resulting in a shared benefit to consumers and industry of about \$250 million annually.

Leveraging Resources

While our primary focus is preventing foodborne illness by ensuring that industry produces safe food, we can also improve food safety by collaborating with our Federal partners and educating consumers.

For example, we have met with our stakeholders to discuss ways that we can promote good pre-harvest practices that will reduce the likelihood of contamination at slaughter. We also work with our Federal food safety partners to share food safety expertise and best practices.

In addition to doing everything we can to ensure the safety of meat, poultry and processed egg products before they get to the store shelves, we feel it is also our responsibility to provide consumers with the tools they need to handle food safely at home.

That is why FSIS, CDC, and FDA teamed up with the Ad Council to launch a national public service campaign called *Food Safe Families*, which educates consumers about the risks of foodborne illness and how to prevent it. For an investment of \$2.8 million over 3 years, the Ad Council has been able to run a national TV, radio, and print ad campaign worth an estimated \$46 million through donated media.

To better reach consumers and ensure that our food safety messages are received by a larger audience, FSIS also utilizes various social and new media platforms to reach out about key food safety messages, such as recalls and safe food handling practices.

FSIS actively disseminates food safety messages through its virtual food safety expert, Ask Karen; Twitter; Facebook; Blogs; and YouTube. For example, the number of views of Ask Karen answers increased from 444,000 in FY 2011 to more than 1.1 million in FY 2012. 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, and that number grows by about 2,000 weekly.

Conclusion

We are continually assessing whether we are doing our best to prevent foodborne illnesses in the most effective and efficient way possible. Government can deliver better than people expect, and we are committed to doing so.

We at the Office of Food Safety and FSIS are one team, with one purpose, working toward a common and extremely important goal. I am proud to lead the FSIS workforce in its mission to protect public health.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.