

FOOD SAFETY

Statement of Brian Ronholm, Acting Under Secretary for Food Safety Before the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Farr, and members of the Subcommittee, I am Brian Ronholm, Acting Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). With me are Al Almanza, Administrator of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and Michael Young, USDA's Budget Officer. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the status of the agency's programs and policies.

I am pleased to appear before you today in support of the President's Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 budget request for FSIS, which is set at \$1.001 billion, a \$9.3 million decrease from FY 2014. With this funding level, I am confident that FSIS will maintain the effectiveness of its core mission of preventing food-borne illness.

By law, FSIS is required to examine and inspect all livestock and poultry slaughtered and processed for use in commerce for human food. Our inspectors and veterinarians monitor the health of the animals brought to slaughter and ensure that livestock are treated humanely. These inspectors also collect the samples that our scientists analyze for the presence of pathogens and residues. These dedicated men and women are on the front lines nationwide following regulations and directives backed by scientific evidence to ensure that meat, poultry, and processed eggs in commerce are safe and wholesome.

FSIS frontline and support personnel are poised to maintain and accomplish the agency's mission, and indeed we are legally required to have a sufficient number of inspectors present in every single meat and poultry plant in the country. Like any organization, FSIS has a vacancy

rate that fluctuates as inspectors leave work or retire. But FSIS always prioritizes food safety inspection and dedicates significant resources toward ensuring that all plants have the required number of inspectors. I am confident that the budget we have presented will provide every establishment we regulate in this country with appropriate staffing levels.

Our Mission

The main driver of FSIS' Strategic Plan is the focus on the Agency's public health mission and the ability to adapt to evolving food safety risks. Our Annual Performance Plans and Reports are linked to the Strategic Plan and hold the Agency accountable by reporting on the accomplishments and deficiencies, as measured by 36 specific items within eight goals.

FY 2013 Accomplishments

The first goal in the Strategic Plan is to ensure that food safety inspection aligns with existing and emerging risks. As noted in the budget, the All-Illness Measure shows a reduction of 479,621 in FY 2012 to 427,171 in FY 2013, representing a reduction of about 52,000 illnesses.

In addition to the reduction in the All-Illness Measure, FSIS "met" or "exceeded" 81 percent of its 32 annual performance measures in FY 2013. The Agency's accomplishments included:

- Launching the *Salmonella* Action Plan;
- Expanding our work using Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) outbreak data to estimate foodborne illness attribution for FSIS-regulated product;
- Adding three major functionalities to the Public Health Information System (PHIS), as well as implementing it in 23 State Meat and Poultry Inspection programs;
- Expanding the number of establishments employing a humane handling systematic approach;
- Increasing public education targets with at-risk and vulnerable audiences; and
- Improving traceback timelines, as well as response time in which consumer complaints were investigated.

To help our agency be more user-friendly to small and very small establishments, we published a Small Plant News Guidebook about how to develop a recall plan, developed a new rule on generic labeling, improved our electronic Label Submission and Approval System (LSAS), and updated our PHIS industry user guidelines.

However, while these accomplishments are significant, our most recent Annual Performance Report for FY 2013 demonstrates that there is much work to do, especially in reducing the incidence of *Salmonella*.

Salmonella

Salmonella is one of the most challenging issues FSIS faces in keeping America's food supply safe. We share the frustration expressed by many with the recent outbreaks of *salmonellosis* over the past year, and want to emphasize that combating *Salmonella* is the agency's top priority.

In 2013, the Agency developed the *Salmonella* Action Plan, which outlines the actions FSIS will take to lower *Salmonella* contamination rates on meat and poultry products. The plan includes developing a new performance standard for comminuted poultry, as well as new strategies for inspection to address potential sources of *Salmonella* contamination throughout the food production process. Finally, the plan realigns the agency's education and outreach tools to raise public awareness of ways to limit cross contamination with *Salmonella* at home. We have been moving on all fronts to implement this plan.

FSIS is always adapting our regulatory strategies to maximize their public health benefit. For instance, while FSIS has reduced the national average of *Salmonella* on young chickens during the past decade, our experiences this past year with the *Salmonella* outbreak associated with Foster Farms poultry products reinforce the need to control this pathogen on chicken parts. A recently completed baseline survey found the national average of *Salmonella* on chicken parts to be approximately 24 percent. FSIS believes setting a performance standard for chicken parts will help reduce consumer exposure to *Salmonella*.

Although not an adulterant, *Salmonella* is a pathogen, and FSIS treats it as such. Frequent presence of *Salmonella* in a product may indicate that the production process is not adequately controlled, and in situations like this, food that is contaminated with *Salmonella* is adulterated. In these instances, FSIS has the authority to close an establishment for failing to produce safe food and to keep it closed until adequate control measures are in place. FSIS has exercised this approach when supported by evidence.

We must work within the law and legal precedent as we deal with *Salmonella*, but we will not cease to be creative in combating this pathogen in order to protect the public health. We know that in order to reduce cases of foodborne illness, we must reduce the amount of *Salmonella* in the food supply.

Modernization to Improve Food Safety

One way we are attacking *Salmonella* is through our efforts to modernize our approach to poultry slaughter inspection. We first began inspecting poultry in 1957. Since that time, we have learned a great deal about how to detect and control pathogens. Rather than checking for quality defects, the proposal to modernize poultry slaughter allows FSIS to realign the duties of our inspectors so those on-line can focus on food safety defects, and those off-line can collect more samples and monitor establishment sanitary conditions more closely to ensure that establishments are complying with FSIS regulations. Through these activities -- rather than checking for visual defects -- we can prevent and control bacteria on poultry more effectively.

This new inspection system is designed to be a critical piece of our aggressive agenda to control *Salmonella* in poultry. The risk assessment that we conducted based on the data from our pilot study of the new inspection system show that an inspection system that provides for increased off-line inspection activities that are directly related to food safety results in greater compliance with sanitation and HACCP regulations. In addition, these activities lead to poultry carcasses with lower levels of visible fecal contamination and equivalent or lower levels of *Salmonella* contamination. The risk assessment has been peer-reviewed and estimates that this new approach will prevent approximately 5,000 foodborne illnesses each year.

Targeting and Leveraging Resources

In addition to *Salmonella*, FSIS also targets other common and dangerous pathogens, thereby reducing their prevalence in finished food products. The agency coordinates the development of its policies with other USDA agencies and other Federal agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as foreign governments and international organizations, to ensure a comprehensive approach to food safety.

By revising current procedures and removing outdated regulatory requirements, the agency will further reduce the risk of foodborne illness by focusing FSIS inspection activities on those tasks that advance FSIS' core mission of food safety.

Conclusion

The dedicated men and women of FSIS work every day toward a common and extremely important goal of preventing food-borne illness. We take our mission seriously and understand the importance of our roles in ensuring the safety of the nation's food supply.

Thank you for your continued support and the opportunity to report on the work we do to protect public health.