

**Statement by Alfred V. Almanza
Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Peterson, and members of the Committee, my name is Al Almanza, Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Thank you for the opportunity again to come before you today to discuss the Food Safety and Inspection Service. I appreciate this chance to highlight our mission and our people.

Who We Are

FSIS is the public health agency in the U.S. Department of Agriculture responsible for ensuring that the nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and processed egg products, whether domestic or imported, is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged. FSIS inspection personnel inspect each and every livestock and poultry carcass before it can enter commerce. No meat or poultry product can enter commerce unless we can find that it is not adulterated and apply our mark of inspection. In addition, FSIS reviews and approves the labels of meat, poultry, and processed egg products and ensures that they are truthful, not misleading, and contain key information. We also take action should misbranded or economically adulterated products enter commerce.

After publication in 1906 of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which described in detail the unsanitary working conditions in a Chicago meatpacking house, Congress passed legislation providing for the inspection of meat. Ultimately, this legislation became the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA). In addition, Congress passed the Poultry Products Inspection Act

(PPIA), the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA), and the Egg Products Inspection Act, all of which the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) enforces.

What We Do

Our employees work in approximately 6,389 federally inspected establishments, three FSIS laboratories, 122 ports-of-entry, and 150,000 in-commerce facilities nationwide. During FY 2015, FSIS Inspection program personnel ensured that public health requirements were met in establishments that slaughter or process approximately 145 million head of livestock and 9 billion poultry carcasses. In addition, inspection program personnel also conducted nearly 7 million food safety and food defense procedures to verify whether systems at all federally inspected facilities maintained food defense procedures to protect against intentional contamination.

The Agency also is responsible for ensuring that imports of meat, poultry, and egg products are safe and wholesome. FSIS does this through a three part process. First, FSIS determines whether the statutes, regulations, and other documents of any country that wishes to export product to the U.S. establish a food safety system that is equivalent to that of the U.S. Countries provide this information to FSIS by using the Self-Reporting Tool (SRT). Should FSIS find on the basis of its review of the documents that the country's system appears to be equivalent, FSIS will send auditors to the country to assess its system in action. On the basis of the results of the audit and the other information that FSIS has collected, the Agency decides whether the country is equivalent.

FSIS evaluates an exporting country's food safety system on an ongoing basis. It inspects all eligible products from that country at U.S. points-of-entry. Each year, FSIS reviews

any changes in the foreign country's food safety system that the country identifies through resubmission of the SRT. In addition, FSIS also conducts in-country audits of the system. The audits will be guided, at least in part, based on the findings of the SRT reviews and the point of entry inspections. Based on these reviews, the Agency decides whether the country is maintaining equivalence.

Modernization

A key theme for FSIS is modernization. Inspection changed from a sight, smell, and touch approach to a more science-based method when FSIS implemented its Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) regulations between January 1997 and January 2000. Our inspection activities include sampling ready-to-eat meat and poultry products for *Listeria monocytogenes* testing, sampling raw product for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* testing, and sampling raw beef product for testing certain strains of pathogenic *E. coli* (including *E. coli* O157:H7).

In FY 2015, FSIS laid the groundwork for fully enforcing all HACCP validation requirements—those related to necessary in-plant data as well as those related to scientific support. The Agency informed plants that they would need to analyze their validation methods to ensure that the scientific support matches their in-plant processes, and that they needed to have at least 90 days' worth of data to show that their plants met the critical operational parameters in their processes. The new validation verification procedures, which we have implemented in large plants and will implement in small and very small plants next month, will help to ensure that establishments' HACCP plans work as intended to address food safety hazards. To assist with this process, FSIS has provided plants with training, webinars, and the FSIS Compliance

Guideline HACCP Systems Validation, a document designed to help small and very small meat and poultry plants meet the validation requirements.

We have made other changes in how we do inspection. In FY 2015, FSIS adopted a new methodology for conducting Food Safety Assessments (FSAs). Under this methodology, an Enforcement, Investigations, and Analysis officer conducts a Public Health Risk Evaluation (PHRE) before deciding whether a Food Safety Assessment is warranted. Under this new methodology, a FSA takes 5 to 7 days instead of approximately 35 days. This new methodology allowed us to save an estimated \$1.18M and 26,600 hours within 3 months of its implementation. The new FSA methodology allows FSIS to more efficiently use its resources by targeting higher risk establishments.

One key investment that we have been able to make thanks to congressional support is in the Public Health Information System (PHIS). PHIS captures data in automated and useful formats. The availability of this data provides for more timely and efficient analysis of food safety inspection-related trends that drive our ability to take actions that enhance our ability to protect the public health. In addition, PHIS is allowing us to make better use of the Public Health Regulations (PHRs) to focus the inspection activities of our in-plant personnel. With PHIS, we now collect data about the regulations that inspectors are verifying when they perform inspection. Before, we only knew regulation data when inspection tasks found noncompliance. Now that we have more complete data, we can better assess non-compliance rates of individual regulations. That has allowed us to identify regulations for which non-compliance is linked to adverse public health outcomes. We instruct our inspectors to conduct special focused activities, such as PHREs and FSAs when we spot a pattern of noncompliance with these PHRs.

FSIS coordinates closely with other Federal public health agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Our collaboration with our partner agencies makes FSIS more effective and improves our responses, particularly during recalls and outbreaks. In 2011, we created the Interagency Food Safety Analytics Collaboration (IFSAC) which brings together senior leaders and technical experts on foodborne illness source attribution from these agencies. In FY 2015, one of IFSAC's major successes was developing harmonized attribution estimates for Salmonella, E. coli O157, Listeria monocytogenes, and Campylobacter for major food categories and hosting a public meeting with over 300 participants to share those findings. These improved estimates of foodborne illness source attribution have informed efforts to prioritize food safety initiatives, interventions, and policies for reducing foodborne illnesses.

One way that the Agency is modernizing food safety is by improving the way we inspect. In 2015, we began implementation of the final rule on modernization of poultry slaughter inspection. The implementation of this final rule requires that all poultry slaughter establishments take measures to prevent contamination, rather than addressing contamination after it occurs. Poultry facilities are required to perform their own microbiological testing in their production process to show that they are controlling enteric pathogens (e.g., Salmonella and Campylobacter).

The Agency established the voluntary New Poultry Inspection System (NPIS), in which poultry slaughter establishments sort their own product for quality defects before presenting it to FSIS inspectors for food safety inspections. As of March 1, 2016, 51 plants have indicated that they are interested in operating under or have transitioned to the NPIS. The system allows for FSIS inspectors to focus less on routine quality assurance tasks that have little relationship to

preventing pathogens like Salmonella and instead to focus on strategies that are proven to strengthen food safety. Our food safety inspectors are now better equipped to verify that establishments maintain effective HACCP systems, which is a more effective and efficient way to use our inspection resources. We are considering a similar approach for hog inspection. We have collected a lot of data in these hog plants, and we are now in the process of analyzing that data to determine what our approach should be.

One of our greatest accomplishments has been the new food safety pathogen reduction performance standards for chicken parts and comminuted poultry that are designed to dramatically reduce Salmonella and Campylobacter illnesses contracted from chicken and turkey products, as well as to reduce the presence of these pathogens in raw chicken breasts, legs, and wings. The performance standards are a major step in the FSIS' Salmonella Action Plan, which the Agency developed in 2013. FSIS's science-based risk assessment estimates that implementation of these standards could achieve a 30 percent reduction in illnesses from Salmonella and 19 percent from Campylobacter, an average of 50,000 averted illnesses annually. FSIS chose this aggressive goal for addressing Salmonella because it will help achieve the Healthy People 2020 national goal of reducing human illness by 25 percent.

Other FY2015-FY2016 Accomplishments

Additional FY 2015 and early FY 2016 accomplishments for FSIS include the establishment of an exploratory sampling program for raw pork products and continuous sampling of chicken parts; publication of several compliance guidelines to help industry address pathogens in their product, including "Sanitary Dressing and Antimicrobial Implementation at Veal Slaughter Establishments: Identified Issues and Best Practices" and "FSIS Compliance

Guidelines for Controlling Salmonella and Campylobacter in Raw Poultry;” issued a best practices guideline for retailers to help them to protect public health by decreasing the potential for *Listeria monocytogenes* contamination; published a rule that will become effective in May 2016, that will require that labels declare that raw beef product has been mechanically tenderized and will require validated cooking instructions on labels of mechanically tenderized beef products going to household consumers, hotels, restaurants, or similar institutions; completed work on the FSIS Salmonella Action Plan; and continued collaboration with the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) for identification of additional analyses for consideration and implementation in the multi-residue method for testing.

As mandated by the Congress, FSIS is responsible for the regulation of Siluriformes fish products. We published the final rule in December 2015, with March 1, 2016 as the effective date of the new inspection system. We began inspecting in slaughter plants on March 1. We established an 18-month transition period before FSIS begins fully enforcing all requirements in the new regulations, in order to allow regulated Siluriformes industry time to meet our food safety regulations on the first day of full implementation, September 1, 2017. During the transitional period, we will inspect processing-only plants and re-inspect imported product on a limited basis.

So far, we have held public educational outreach meetings in Washington, D.C. and Stoneville, MS for industry, farmers, foreign countries, and other affiliates to learn about the program and to ask questions. Our personnel have traveled to several foreign countries to provide information. We also held a meeting in Newark, N.J. for importers. We also plan to hold importer meetings in Los Angeles, CA and Houston, TX. In addition, we have provided mandatory training for inspectors and will hold additional meetings in our ten district offices.

Consumer and Stakeholder Outreach

To keep the public safe, we conduct outreach and educational awareness efforts to small and very small plants and to the millions of Americans who consume our products every single day.

With more than 90 percent of the 6,389 FSIS inspected plants considered small or very small operations, FSIS has a Small Plant Help Desk that serves to assist plant owners and operators with questions. Many of these questions involve technical expertise, information, and providing advice on FSIS regulations and policies. During FY2015, the Small Plant Help Desk received and responded to 2,031 inquiries in person, over the phone, and via email. In addition, FSIS publishes Compliance Guides and hosts webinars that help small plants comply with new or modified FSIS regulations.

Moreover, just as FSIS is focusing on modernizing our inspection techniques, we also are modernizing the way we communicate with our consumers. For 30 years, the USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline has enabled consumers to ask questions or report incidents of foodborne illness. The Hotline receives more than 80,000 calls each year and helps prevent foodborne illness by answering questions about the safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat, poultry, and processed egg products.

The Food Safety Education Staff (FSES) has had many successes in consumer food safety outreach throughout FY2016. Some of these initiatives include: partnering with the Ad Council, partnerships for reaching at-risk groups, Hispanic outreach, social media, and our new smartphone application, the Foodkeeper App, which has been downloaded nearly 100,000 times.

To remain transparent to the public, we hold monthly public meetings with consumer and industry stakeholders on upcoming policy developments. We also distribute a weekly newsletter

with policy updates, export requirements, testing results, and personnel changes, called the “Constituent Update.” In addition, FSIS has two advisory committees, the National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection (NACMPI) and the National Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods (NACMCF). These committees are made up of State, consumer, and industry representatives who work to advise the Secretary of Agriculture on food safety policies that will contribute to USDA’s regulatory policy development.

Strategic Planning for Accountability

Every five years, FSIS adopts a new Strategic Plan that sets out the Agency’s goals and initiatives and is the foundation for both the long range and day-to-day operations of the Agency. A main driver of the Strategic Plan is the desire for the Agency to continue to be an ever more trusted and successful public health agency—an Agency that adapts to the changing nature of food safety risks. Outlined in the Agency’s current strategic plan are three themes and eight goals within those themes. The themes are “Prevent Foodborne Illness,” “Understand and Influence the Farm-to-Table Continuum,” and “Empower People and Strengthen Infrastructure.”

Each year, FSIS also develops an Annual Performance Plan (APP) that sets out three or four key results that each of the Agency’s ten offices intends to accomplish to advance the Strategic Plan. The APP provides the American public and FSIS employees with a clear list of Agency priorities and a detailed roadmap of the steps we intend to take to achieve our goals. It provides an operational plan that we are following in order to steer the Agency as we work to prevent foodborne illness and protect public health. It is traceable and transparent, so that we are accountable to the Congress and the American public. At the end of each year, we publish a report that sets out how well we did in achieving key results.

FSIS has begun development of its 2017-2021 Strategic Plan. This work will continue through FY 2016. FSIS held both public and stakeholder meetings, including meetings with FDA and CDC, to gather input on key focus areas, issues, and trends in food safety that the Agency should consider in developing the Plan. This critical input from industry, consumers, consumer advocacy groups, and Federal collaborators has helped shape the Agency's development of desired outcomes, specific strategic objectives, and meaningful targets and measures to assess results.

Conclusion

These are some of the ways we are holding ourselves accountable for achieving positive results and outcomes on food safety issues. We continuously track performance, modernize, and apply science in developing our approach to the food safety problems we face. I began my career at FSIS as a line inspector, and I know first-hand the hard work that the dedicated men and women who make up FSIS's inspection force perform every day to ensure that we have the safest food supply in the world. It is because of this work that millions of Americans can sit down at the table and enjoy safe, wholesome meals each day. Thank you for your support for our vital work as a public health agency.