

FOOD SAFETY

**Statement of Al Almanza, Deputy 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**

February 26, 2015

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Farr, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Al Almanza, Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). With me is 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) 2016 budget request for the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which is set at \$1.012 billion. This includes \$60.9 million for state inspection programs; 3.7 million for Codex; and an additional \$2.5 million for catfish inspection. With this funding level, I am confident that FSIS will maintain effectiveness in its core mission of preventing food-borne illness.

The President is again asking Congress for authority to submit fast-track proposals to reorganize or consolidate Federal programs and agencies to reduce the size of Government or cut costs. With this authority, the Administration is proposing to consolidate the FSIS and the food safety components of the Food and Drug Administration to create a single new agency within the Department of Health and Human Services.

In the meantime, I am responsible for making sure the Agency functions properly today. The way FSIS conducts business right now is not changing as a result of this proposal. Carcass-by-

carcass inspection is the cornerstone of our work, and this proposal does not change that. As I said to our personnel during an all-employee Town Hall meeting earlier this month, the dedicated public servants of FSIS are all are doing great work and will continue to do so. The Administration's proposal will not overshadow the things that we are doing this fiscal year and plan to do in FY 2016. Modern, science-based food safety requirements and strong enforcement are now and will continue to be very much a part of what we do.

FSIS is the public health agency in USDA 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. By law, FSIS is required to examine and inspect all livestock and poultry slaughtered and processed, as well as processed egg products, for use in commerce for human food. This directive to our agency is a result of the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, and the Egg Products Inspection Act. The USDA mark of inspection is an important part of the confidence that the American consumer has in the safety of their food supply.

FSIS is legally required to have inspectors present in every meat, poultry, and processed egg products facilities in the country. Our inspectors and veterinarians verify the health of the animals upon their arrival at slaughter plants and ensure that livestock are treated humanely. They then verify that the plants' slaughter process functions as designed to produce safe products. As part of that verification, they collect the samples that our scientists analyze for the presence of pathogens and chemical residues. The dedicated men and women of FSIS are on the front lines nationwide following procedures that are designed based on the best available scientific evidence to ensure that meat, poultry, and processed eggs in commerce are safe and wholesome.

FSIS will always prioritize in-plant food safety inspection and dedicates significant resources to 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.

Just over 20 years ago, we relied on sight, touch and smell as a basis for our inspection system. As one who began his career in 1978 as an inspector at a slaughter house in Dalhart, Texas, I can tell you I know this is true. I did it. But this approach changed drastically following the 1993 Jack-in-the-Box outbreak of *E. coli* in ground beef, which caused 400 illnesses and four deaths. In response, FSIS took action by adopting a more science-based inspection – science rooted in the work of researchers and public health experts. This shift has significantly contributed to the overall decline in bacterial foodborne illnesses. It is important to remember how far we’ve come, but our work is not done, and inspection system modernization continues. That is what I want to highlight today as I discuss our accomplishments over the past year.

FY 2014 Accomplishments

The main driver of FSIS’ Strategic Plan is the focus on the Agency’s public health mission and the ability to adapt to evolving and emerging food safety risks. Our Annual Performance Plan (APP) for FY 2015 is linked to the Strategic Plan and holds the Agency accountable by reporting on the accomplishments and deficiencies, as measured by 36 specific key results within eight goals and structured along three basic themes: preventing foodborne illness; using science to understand and influence the farm to table continuum; and empowering people and strengthening infrastructure.

Ultimately, it is all about protecting the public health and reducing foodborne illness. And, as noted in the budget and our APP, the All-Illness Measure showed a reduction of about 41,000 estimated illnesses between FY2013 and FY2014. Further, in FY 2014, FSIS “met” or “exceeded” 81 percent of our annual performance measures. Here are just a few of those accomplishments from the past year:

- Began implementation of the New Poultry Inspection System after the release of the Poultry Modernization Final Rule this past summer;
- Launched stronger performance measures to reduce *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in poultry products; these new standards could help prevent an estimated 50,000 illnesses annually;

- Drafted, based on risk assessment findings, a best practices guideline for retailers to help them to protect public health by decreasing the potential for *Listeria monocytogenes* contamination;
- Completed an economic analysis for expanding the testing for non-O157 in ground beef and components other than trim;
- Announced and began implementing the strategy to co-analyze all raw beef product samples for *Salmonella* and STEC;
- Announced a proposed rule requiring all makers of ground beef, including retail outlets, to maintain more complete record-keeping – i.e., “grinding logs” – sensitive to the concerns by industry but informed by the advantage to the public health of an enhanced ability to trace product back to the original supplier in case of an outbreak;
- Expanded our work using Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) outbreak data to estimate foodborne illness attribution for FSIS-regulated products;
- Prepared to start pork exploratory sampling;
- Continued to implement the Public Health Information System (PHIS) by increasing plant connectivity and enhancing information sharing capabilities, thus aligning our efforts to modernize food safety through technological enhancements;
- Continued to work to increase the number of establishments employing a humane handling systematic approach;
- Increased public education by targeting at-risk and vulnerable audiences; and
- Improved traceback timelines, as well as response time in which consumer complaints were investigated.

Combating *Salmonella*

During the Agency’s testimony last year, we reported on our plans to combat *Salmonella* contamination, which is one of the most challenging issues FSIS faces in keeping America’s food supply safe. Combating *Salmonella* remains the Agency’s top priority. Thus, in 2014, FSIS sought comments on updated and more aggressive performance standards for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in chicken parts and comminuted poultry in response to the Agency’s *Salmonella* Action Plan, which FSIS introduced in 2013. We believe these standards will have a major impact on public health, preventing an estimated 50,000 illnesses annually.

The *Salmonella* Action Plan outlines the actions FSIS will take to lower *Salmonella* contamination rates on meat and poultry products. The plan also includes developing new strategies for inspection to address potential sources of *Salmonella* contamination throughout the food production process. In addition, the Plan calls for the agency to redesign its education and outreach tools to raise public awareness of ways to limit *Salmonella* cross contamination at home. We continue to move forward to implement all components of this plan and recently published a one year status report.

FSIS adapts our actions to address emerging risks to maximize public health benefits. The dramatic reduction of *Salmonella* contamination in young chickens during the past decade is an example where we've seen real results. In 2006, FSIS sampling showed that approximately 16 percent of carcass samples that the Agency took were positive for this pathogen. By 2014, that number was below 4.5 percent. We hope that the performance standard for poultry parts, including chicken, will have a similar effect. The baseline that the Agency recently completed on parts showed a national prevalence of *Salmonella* of 24 percent. FSIS believes that implementing a new and stronger performance standard for poultry parts will help to reduce consumer exposure to *Salmonella* from this source.

Modernization to Improve Food Safety

Another way we are attacking *Salmonella* pursuant to the *Salmonella* Action Plan is through our efforts to modernize our approach to poultry slaughter inspection. In 2014, we have made a major advance in this effort by publishing a final rule on poultry slaughter inspection and beginning the implementation of the New Poultry Inspection System (NPIS).

As a result of the final rule, poultry slaughter plants, except for very small plants, have begun sampling their products at two points on the slaughter line, both before and after the chiller, each day. The goal of this testing is to verify that plants are controlling the presence of enteric pathogens like *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* on their products.

The final rule also put in place a new inspection system that is designed to reduce the risk posed by *Salmonella* in poultry. A risk assessment done by FSIS shows inspection systems that provide increased off-line inspection activities directly related to food safety result in greater compliance with sanitation and HACCP regulations. In addition, these off-line inspection activities lead to poultry carcasses that have lower levels of visible fecal contamination and equivalent or lower levels of *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* contamination. The peer-reviewed risk assessment estimates that this new approach to inspection will prevent approximately 5,000 foodborne illnesses each year.

The New Poultry Inspection System aligns with Goals 5 and 6 of our Strategic Plan, which are about using science to understand foodborne illness and emerging trends and developing effective policies. Other accomplishments of FSIS within these two goals in 2014 include:

- Completed all-priority data analysis projects for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in raw products, *Listeria monocytogenes* and *Salmonella* in RTE products, and STECs in raw beef, helping FSIS to identify actions to improve policy or instructions to field personnel based on these analyses;
- Announced final traceback procedures for beef product contaminated with STEC that will allow FSIS to identify problems sooner, and better protect the public from potentially contaminated product; and
- Made available pre-harvest guidance on intervention options for reducing Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* shedding. This guidance incorporated lessons learned from the cattle pre-harvest meeting in November 2011 and provided important updates on pre-harvest interventions for non-O157.

I am confident that we are accomplishing our goals. In terms of compliance, which is Goal 2 of our Strategic Plan, the percentage of broiler establishments passing the carcass *Salmonella* Verification Testing Standard exceeded the FY 2014 goal of 92 percent. The percentage of establishments with a functional food defense plan increased slightly in 2014 to 84 percent, and about 95 percent of in-commerce facilities have implemented food defense practices. And, after the issuance of the FSIS Compliance Guide in late 2013, on-site assessments have resulted in 63

percent of active slaughter establishments having a systematic approach to humane handling, exceeding last year's target of 60 percent. In measurement after measurement, we are improving the public health and making America's food supply safer.

Leveraging Resources

But FSIS doesn't work alone in keeping the food supply safe. 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.

In modernizing our approach to food safety, we are collaborating and communicating with the public – including our partners in industry, stakeholder groups, state and local government, and academia. We benefit from the recommendations of outside experts formally through the National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection (NACMPI) and the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Food (NACMCF), and informally through periodic meetings with industry and consumer stakeholder groups roughly once a month. Indeed, it is as a result of recommendations from NACMPI in 2013 that FSIS conducts a periodic analysis of the Public Health Regulations (PHRs) that the Agency has highlighted and posts revised lists and corresponding cut-points on its website, which informs FSIS decision-making regarding prioritizing the in-depth evaluations of establishments' food safety systems, or Food Safety Assessments, which are conducted by our Enforcement, Investigations, and Analysis Officers. Another analysis was conducted in 2014, and the Agency posted a revised set of PHRs at the start of FY 2015.

In FY 2014, in order to be responsive to the unique needs of small and very small establishments, we published guidance to small plants about how to develop a recall plan and developed a new rule on generic labeling so that only a limited number of labels need to be submitted to FSIS for approval before they can be used on product in the market. Finally, we have improved our electronic Label Submission and Approval System (LSAS), so that all companies can submit their labels to FSIS electronically and more easily obtain FSIS label

approval. FSIS also updated our PHIS industry user guidelines, making PHIS more user-friendly and thereby facilitating compliance.

With respect to international stakeholders, FSIS created the Office of International Coordination within the Office of the Administrator to coordinate and address international issues. The final import rule was published, requiring that all official import inspection establishments have Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). FSIS has also improved and streamlined our Self-Reporting Tool (SRT), an equivalence questionnaire used by foreign food safety inspection systems to collect key information for countries currently eligible and those seeking eligibility to export FSIS-inspected products to the United States. FSIS has entered all the information that eligible countries have submitted into the SRT and has sent this information to each foreign country. This advancement will enable foreign countries to update their information more easily on an annual basis. FSIS has also posted the SRT on its website to increase the transparency of the equivalence process. FSIS took this step in response to comments that it received on a January 2013 *Federal Register* notice on equivalence. We will continue to look for opportunities to update, streamline, and enhance the effectiveness of our international program.

Conclusion

I have described just some of the ways we are holding ourselves accountable for achieving positive results and outcomes on critical food safety issues, as described in our 2014 Annual Performance Plan. We are continuously tracking performance, modernizing, and applying science-based approaches. FSIS considers our work towards strategic planning and the Annual Performance Plan a critical factor in ensuring the Agency's long-term effectiveness and its efficiency of operations. We are committed to accomplishing the work necessary to create both an overarching and relevant Strategic Plan, as well as a yearly Annual Performance Plan, which both ensure that we stay focused on our aim to reduce foodborne-related illnesses across the United States.

As we look toward the future, we are eager to finalize the proposed mechanically tenderized beef rule, which will make it easier for consumers to understand what they are buying at supermarkets and what steps they must take in the kitchen to keep their families safe. We look forward to

further guiding industry in driving down pathogens through performance standards. We look forward to further improvements in PHIS, a tool that has proven to be invaluable in communicating real and potential threats and guiding policy.

As we strive to continue building upon past success to make our food safety system better, it is important to understand that we do have the world's greatest food safety system. People from around the world want our products in part because they know they are safe. Enhanced food safety increases consumer confidence, and safe products create, maintain, and expand markets for U.S. exports. More and more countries agree our foods are produced within a first-class food safety system, which is why over the past year, Mexico, Uruguay, Ecuador, Hong Kong, and Sri Lanka all lifted longstanding restrictions to provide for full access to safe, wholesome U.S. beef and beef products. This is why other nations strive to emulate our system. Safe food opens new markets from the European Union to Asia to Latin America.

As I mentioned earlier, I began my career at FSIS as a line inspector. I know first-hand the hard work that these dedicated men and women 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 continued support for our vital work as a public health agency.