

FOOD SAFETY AND INSPECTION SERVICE  
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 Farr, and other Members of the Subcommittee, I am Dr. Elisabeth Hagen, Under Secretary for Food Safety. With me is Al Almanza, Administrator of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS).

I am pleased to appear before you today in support of the President's fiscal year (FY) 2013 budget request for FSIS, and to discuss the status of FSIS programs. The President's FY 2013 budget request for FSIS includes \$995,503,000 in appropriated funding, a net decrease of \$8,924,000 from the FY 2012 appropriation of \$1,004,427,000. With this funding level, I am confident that FSIS will maintain the effectiveness of its core mission.

In 2011, FSIS released a 5-year Strategic Plan, which details the Agency's goals for FY 2011-2016, and outlines the framework for achieving these goals. The full plan can be found on the FSIS website ([http://www.fsis.usda.gov/about/Strategic\\_Plan\\_2011-2016\\_Summary/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/about/Strategic_Plan_2011-2016_Summary/index.asp)).

FSIS' Strategic Plan is divided into eight goals based on the following strategic themes: preventing foodborne illness, empowering people and strengthening infrastructure, and understanding and influencing the farm-to-table continuum.

## **Preventing Foodborne Illness**

The first strategic theme, preventing foodborne illness, is achievable through the following goals: maximizing industry compliance with food safety policies; reaching out to and educating the public to improve food-handling practices; strengthening collaboration among stakeholders to prevent foodborne illness; and ensuring that inspection aligns with risks.

Every policy and program that we implement in the Office of Food Safety is designed to prevent foodborne illnesses. We have been particularly successful in protecting consumers from *E. coli* O157 since the implementation of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) and our zero tolerance policy. Between 2000 and 2010, FSIS helped our nation meet the Healthy People 2010 goal to reduce *E. coli* rates by 50 percent, largely because of strengthened beef safety policy and enforcement.

However, until every illness is prevented, we have more to do. While *E. coli* O157 illnesses have been cut almost in half, *Salmonella* illnesses – which according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cause more hospitalizations and deaths than any other type of bacteria found in food – have not declined. That is why we are constantly applying new methods to protect consumers from emerging foodborne hazards. Our successes in targeting O157 have led us to believe that we can make similar strides against *Salmonella*, non-O157 Shiga-toxin producing *E. coli* (STEC), and other pathogens found in FSIS-regulated products. Over the last fiscal year, FSIS has taken steps to do just that.

### Maximizing Industry Compliance with Food Safety Policies

One of the ways that FSIS combats foodborne illness is to encourage industry to reduce the prevalence of pathogens in slaughter and processing establishments. The Agency implemented stricter *Salmonella* and new *Campylobacter* performance standards for poultry products, which are expected to prevent as many as 25,000 foodborne illnesses annually.

In July 2011, we announced the expansion of the *Salmonella* Initiative Program (SIP), which provides public health benefits by encouraging establishments to test for microbial pathogens, a key feature of effective process control. The voluntary, incentive-based program will grant participating establishments waivers of regulatory requirements with the condition that establishments test for *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and generic *E. coli*, and share this internal food safety data with FSIS.

In the past year, we declared the six serogroups of pathogenic *E. coli*, the serogroups of greatest public health concern, as adulterants in non-intact raw beef. FSIS personnel will soon test beef for these six serogroups, and will ensure that raw product that tests positive for any of these strains will be diverted from commerce. While more than 100 Shiga-toxin producing *E. coli* (STEC) serotypes have been associated with human illness, these six serogroups cause between 70 and 83 percent of confirmed non-O157 STEC illnesses, and the CDC estimates that nearly 113,000 foodborne illnesses occur in the United States from these pathogens annually. Thus, combating these six serogroups can make a huge public health impact. FSIS will launch its non-O157 *E. coli* testing program on June 4.

In the past year, we also announced and asked for comment on a new “test and hold” requirement for the meat and poultry industry. By requiring industry to hold products subject to FSIS microbiological testing until the tests determine they are safe to release in commerce, consumer exposure to unsafe food will be reduced significantly. This approach could have prevented 22 recalls during FY 2009 and FY 2010. We expect this policy to result in fewer recalls by industry, fewer illnesses, and increased consumer confidence in the safety of the food supply.

### Public Education and Outreach

Another way we fight foodborne illness is through public education and outreach to improve food-handling practices. We can help people understand and adopt the preparation and cooking practices that will make their families safer.

On June 28, 2011, FSIS launched a joint national multimedia campaign with Health and Human Services (HHS) to help families prevent food poisoning: the Food Safe Families – Check Your Steps campaign. The campaign urges consumers to remember four key steps to food safety: clean (surfaces, utensils and hands), separate (raw meat and poultry from other foods), cook (to a safe temperature), and chill (raw and prepared food). We have reached millions using a variety of donated media, including television, radio, print, and social media tools and the Internet. During the 2011 Thanksgiving season, I participated in a Food Safe Families media tour that generated more than 190 television and radio segments nationwide, reaching 20.3 million people. In addition, the Ad Council’s “separate” television spot ran on Wal-Mart Checkout TV, reaching

50 million shoppers in a 2-week period. Our partnership with Ad Council has enabled us to reach millions of consumers using very limited resources.

On May 5, 2011, FSIS launched Mobile Ask Karen, a web-based smartphone application that gives consumers another way to access the only U.S. government-sponsored food safety virtual-representative. Ask Karen had a self service rate of 98.8 percent for 2011, representing a savings of the time and money that would have otherwise been required for FSIS employees to respond to consumer questions.

As a mother and a doctor, I recognize the importance of developing good health habits at an early age. That is the purpose of our Food Safety Education Camps at schools and the Food Safety Discovery Zone, which visits grocery stores, schools, and community events. A significant part of our outreach programs target children and parents of young children, because children are among the most vulnerable population groups impacted by foodborne illness. Ultimately, though, our efforts reach all consumers because everyone can benefit from knowledge of safe food behaviors.

### Strengthening Collaboration

In order to be successful in our battle with foodborne illness, we must also continue to strengthen collaboration with our food safety partners. In January of this year, USDA and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU), in which we committed to sharing information we have collected related to foodborne pathogens, contaminants and illnesses. As partners in ensuring food safety and furthering the efforts of the

President's Food Safety Working Group, we are also working with FDA to facilitate implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act, which calls for increasing coordination and consultation between the two agencies.

### Ensuring Inspection Aligns with Risks

We must also continue to think of creative ways to improve food safety through more efficient and effective inspection and verification activities. As part of that effort, OFS has announced a proposed rule – Modernization of Poultry Slaughter Inspection – that would facilitate the reduction of pathogen levels in poultry and streamline slaughter inspection in young poultry slaughter establishments. Inspectors would still perform a critical appraisal of each carcass, as mandated by law. In addition, the proposed system would direct FSIS personnel to off-line food safety-related tasks, such as verification of the establishments' HACCP systems, verifying that establishments are controlling their production process, and sampling for pathogenic microorganisms. It would also require that establishments address contamination before the chiller, in order to reduce the occurrence and levels of *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* on the finished carcasses. This new system is expected to prevent over 5,000 foodborne illnesses per year. As reflected in the President's budget request, we estimate that this proposal also will save taxpayers more than \$90 million during the first three years after implementation and lower production costs for the poultry industry by at least \$256 million per year.

### **Empowering People and Strengthening Infrastructure**

FSIS is working continually to identify ways to streamline operations and consolidate staff and resources, but not at the expense of our food safety goals. In order to do this, we must strengthen

infrastructure and empower employees with the tools they need to achieve success. The President's FY 2013 Budget includes an increase of \$4 million to purchase, install, and maintain time clock hardware and software for 3,300 employees in 500 industry plants. This will enable FSIS to capture more accurately the time and attendance of inspection personnel working in slaughter facilities as well as reimbursable overtime, and to electronically prepare establishment bills for that overtime.

As part of the USDA's Blueprint for Stronger Service, the Department proposed a number of office closures and consolidations to reduce administrative costs and improve organizational consistency and efficiency. FSIS has determined that it can streamline resources by reducing the number of district offices from 15 to 10. We are working with employees to limit the impact on affected employees and their families. This will not have an impact on inspectors in the establishments. We estimate that ultimately this would reduce costs by at least \$1 million annually, when fully implemented, while more evenly distributing the circuits, establishments covered, and FSIS employees that each district office oversees.

In April 2011, we launched the Public Health Information System (PHIS), a modern system that collects, analyzes, and even predicts key data about public health trends and food safety violations at the more than 6,000 FSIS-regulated plants across the country. As with any undertaking of this magnitude, PHIS implementation has had its challenges, but the Agency has listened to its employees, made significant improvements to the system and, as a result, has completed implementation of PHIS' domestic component to our employees. PHIS has made daily business more efficient, and given us a greater understanding of the larger food safety

picture. Since PHIS was launched, we know more about establishment operations, volumes, HACCP plans, and other food safety programs. We have increased the number of scheduled samples being taken and lowered the discard rates of unused samples because sampling is more targeted. We also have a pilot program that provides industry with access through PHIS to inspection results and noncompliance reports, allowing for more direct communication. Most importantly, we now have the ability to search and survey information in near real time, as opposed to having to look in separate, unsearchable databases and read paper documents.

### **Understanding and Influencing the Farm-to-Table Continuum**

Contamination can occur anywhere: at the farms where animals are raised, at the slaughter and processing plants that FSIS regulates, and on cutting boards in kitchens. This means that we must be vigilant in working with our food safety partners across the farm-to-table continuum to protect consumers from harmful pathogens.

Everything we do at FSIS is affected by what happens before animals are brought to slaughter, and we can always do more to ensure that the food on consumers' tables is safe. We do not seek an increase in appropriated funding or expansion of our regulatory jurisdiction to the farm, but we think it is important to sponsor a conversation about pre- and post-harvest food safety. I think it is important that all of us with a stake in food safety – producers, packers, public interest groups, and regulators as well as consumers– engage in a comprehensive, honest, and thoughtful conversation about how to truly make food safer. That means examining every opportunity from farm to table, gaining a better understanding of foodborne illness, and implementing effective science-based policies that respond to existing and emerging risks.



In November 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." During the meeting, we discussed the latest thinking on 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. FSIS is already promoting on-farm practices that can reduce and control pathogens at the pre-harvest stage. The Agency is also working on ways to trace contaminated food to the source before the product enters commerce.

### **Foodborne Illness Attribution and Measuring Success**

Progress has been made in the President's challenge to Food Safety Working Group members to create meaningful metrics to measure progress in reducing illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths from contaminated food.

However, the Government Accountability Office reported in its February 2011 High-Risk Series Update that food safety agencies have not developed a government-wide performance plan that includes results-oriented performance measures, which could be used to guide corrective actions and monitor progress. In response to that, FSIS developed a Strategic Plan that will help strengthen collaboration with our regulatory partners to prevent foodborne illness, and measure our progress to that end. As part of this effort, FSIS has made attribution estimates of the total number of illnesses from meat, poultry, and processed egg products and developed a key corporate performance measure of our progress. We calculated between FY 2007-2009 that there

were 436,401 *Salmonella*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, and *E. coli* O157:H7 illnesses attributable to FSIS-regulated products. By FY 2016, we hope to reduce this number to 363,547.

### **Conclusion**

While measuring food safety success is something we always strive for, our greatest successes are often what does not happen. How do you measure product that was not contaminated, and a recall that did not happen because product was detained? You probably are not able, but these immeasurables are key to marking our successes. I would like to recognize that FSIS employees work every day to improve the safety of our food supply, ensuring the humane treatment of livestock, identifying regulatory violations, and using science to detect and detain unsafe product, solving outbreaks, and educating consumers.

This seemingly routine work constitutes the majority of our successes, and these successes only serve to inspire us to do more. I believe that the Strategic Plan will inspire us to work together as one team toward a common goal – preventing foodborne illness – and will measure our progress as we do so.

Thank you for your support in ensuring the safety of meat, poultry, and processed egg products and for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to answering your questions.