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Safe Meat and Poultry

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The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is responsible for ensuring that meat and poultry products moving in interstate commerce for use as human food are safe, wholesome, and accurately labeled. The USDA agency inspects meat and poultry for domestic consumption and for export, and checks imported meat and poultry products as well.

Along with its inspection and other enforcement functions, FSIS is committed to educating the public about food safety. The agency operates a toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline for USDA, in which home economists answer the public's questions about the proper handling of meat and poultry, how to tell if products are safe to eat, and how to better understand meat and poultry labels.

FSIS distributes educational pamphlets and reports on safe food handling (*see box*). The agency also conducts public information campaigns targeted to specific concerns and specific audiences. For example, FSIS is now trying to reach consumers in high-risk groups—young children, the elderly, and people whose immune systems are not working properly—through the health professionals who care for them. Safe food handling is important for these groups, because the consequences of foodborne illness can be more severe than for healthy adults.

Inspection Activities

Those who raise animals and process food are responsible for the safety of their products. Federal inspection verifies that these groups have done their jobs.

The author is a senior public affairs specialist with Information and Legislative Affairs, Food Safety and Inspection Service.



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Spreading the Word About Food Safety

To get information out to the public, FSIS publishes many reports and conducts food safety campaigns each year. Some agency efforts include:

- *The Safe Food Book*—a popular food safety reference for millions of consumers, foodservice professionals, and educators. The book contains detailed information on such topics as bacteria that cause illness, how to keep foods safe in your kitchen, and tips for foods that require special handling.

- "Food Safety Is No Mystery"—a videotape and training kit for institutional foodservice workers. Since October 1987, when the program was first launched, more than 11,000 kits have been distributed to hospitals, nursing homes, and restaurants throughout the United States and in 13 foreign countries.

- *Preventable Foodborne Illness*—a new publication that describes several foodborne illnesses and prevention methods. This brochure is being used in a campaign targeting consumers in high-risk groups.

- *Salmonella and Food Safety*—a pamphlet on *Salmonella* that includes information on how to prevent this bacteria from making you sick.

- *A Margin of Safety*—a technical report for food safety educators. It suggests educational themes that deserve more attention, based on an assessment of the risks of improper handling and consumer understanding and practice of "safe food" behaviors.

For a free copy of *The Safe Food Book*, call 1-800-237-4599. For order forms for the video, which costs \$20.50, and the other publications, which will be sent to you free of charge, call (202) 447-9351.

The agency employs more than 7,000 inspectors in almost as many meat and poultry plants nationwide. In fiscal 1988, FSIS slaughter inspectors and veterinarians inspected more than 119 million livestock and 5.6 billion poultry for signs of disease or abnormalities, both before and after slaughter. Inspectors are obligated to check each carcass and examine the animal more closely if anything seems suspicious. During preparation and packing, the agency's food technologists and processing inspectors reinspected more than 150 billion pounds of hot dogs, chicken nuggets, frozen entrees, and processed products.

FSIS conducted more than 2 million in-plant and laboratory analyses on 460,000 meat and poultry samples during fiscal 1988. Some 325,000 samples were

checked for residues of animal drugs, pesticides, or other chemicals, and 37,000 samples were checked for bacteria or parasites. In fiscal 1989, hundreds of thousands of pounds of meat and millions of pounds of poultry were condemned and therefore could not be used for human food. Still, these condemnation figures represent only 0.3 percent of the meat and 1 percent of the poultry inspected during the period.

Imported meat and poultry must be produced under a system "equal to" that of the United States. To verify the effectiveness of foreign inspection systems, FSIS evaluates their food inspection laws, policies, and operations, including physical reviews of foreign plants, laboratories, and training programs. Computer-selected random samples of meat

and poultry products are reinspected when they enter the United States. Imports destined for use in processed products are examined a third time at U.S. manufacturing plants. In fiscal 1988, FSIS analyzed nearly 22,000 samples of imported products for residues. Drug or chemical residues that exceeded legal limits were found in only 46 cases.

Enforcing the Law

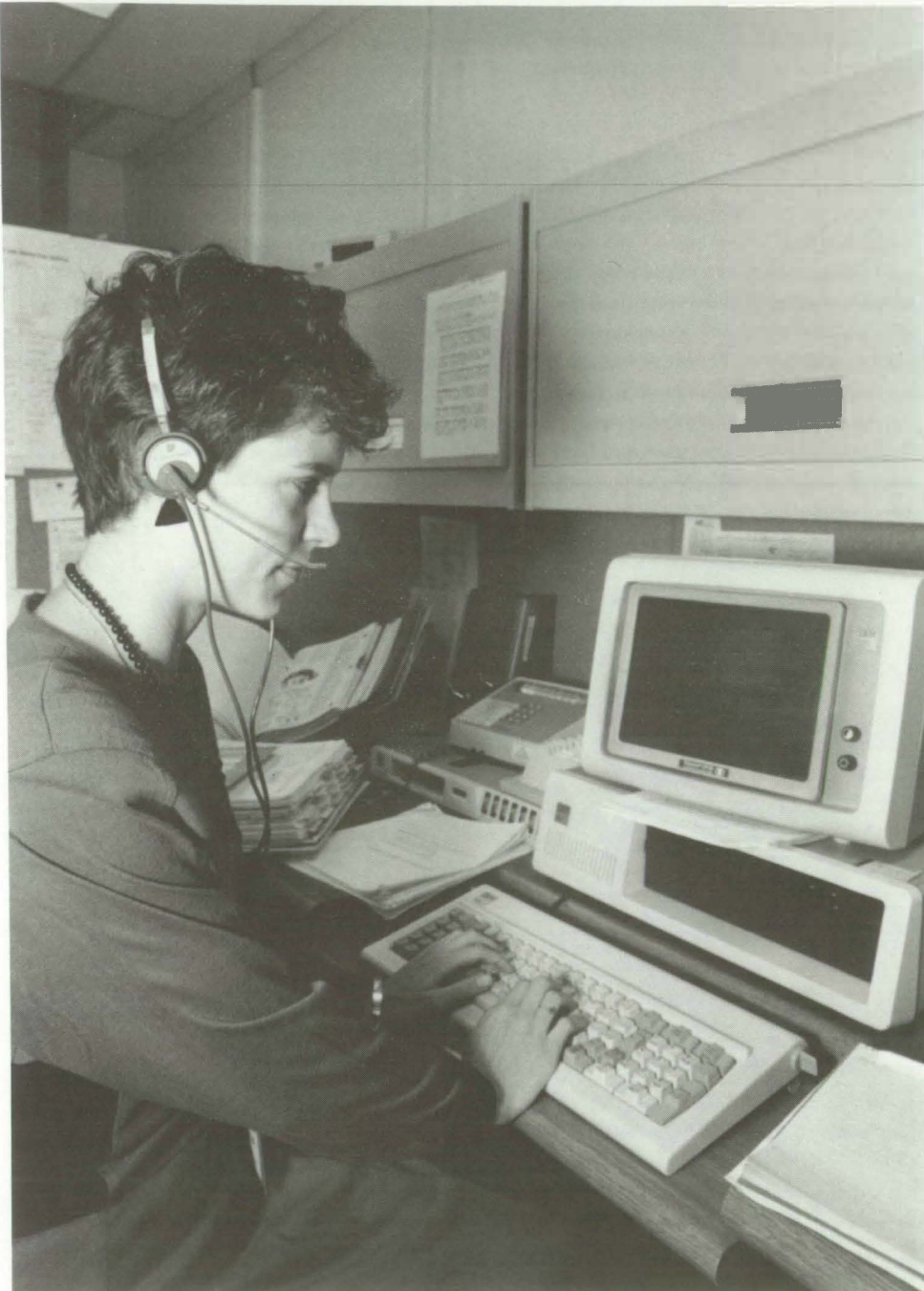
Occasionally, meat or poultry that has been adulterated or mislabeled is detected after it has left the plant. In such cases, the agency gives firms the opportunity to recall the products. The problem is often inadvertent, and companies almost always comply. If they did not, FSIS would seek a court order to seize the products. In fiscal 1988, FSIS helped coordinate 17 product recalls involving almost 1.5 million pounds of meat and poultry.

The agency can also recommend criminal prosecution. The Justice Department won conviction in 24 such cases last year. In one instance, a Virginia firm was convicted of selling bacon with excess water to the Department of Defense. The firm was ordered to pay more than \$200,000, and each owner was fined \$100,000.

To improve compliance, FSIS has been modernizing its inspection tools and updating inspection procedures for both slaughtering and processing. The agency's major research priority for the past several years has been reducing microbial contamination in food, consistent with recommendations made by the National Academy of Sciences. Ways to reduce *Salmonella* contamination in poultry are being researched.

Heard It on the Hotline

More than 50,000 people called USDA's toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline in fiscal 1988. Established earlier as a means of educating the public about



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food safety, the hotline became toll free in 1985. FSIS home economists respond to public inquiries each weekday. Callers who reach the line at other times hear a recorded message that addresses a particular food safety concern. In the summer, for example, when reported cases of salmonellosis increase, callers are likely to hear a message with food safety tips about barbecuing or the need to refrigerate cooked foods within an hour on a very hot day.

According to Susan Templin, home economist and hotline manager, "About 70 percent of our calls are about basic food safety. What are safe cooking temperatures? How soon should cooked dishes be refrigerated? How should meat and poultry be stored?" An increasing number of people are concerned about eggs. Hotline staff encourage consumers and institutions to cook eggs thoroughly, particularly if they will be eaten by chil-

dren, the elderly, or cancer or AIDS patients.

Of the 50,000 or so people who called last year, about half called during business hours and talked to one of the home economists. People from all walks of life and all ages call the hotline, Templin says. "We get calls from children, from retired people, from widowers who are not used to cooking. We even get inquiries from college students asking whether the foods they plan to serve fraternity pledges during hazing rites will be safe to eat."

The hotline is busiest in November and December, including Thanksgiving Day. Before 1988, the hotline staff enjoyed the holiday at home. Now, because of the volume of calls, they talk turkey at work. "Many cooks have questions about how to prepare turkey," Templin said. "Unfortunately, we had to tell a lot of people who called on Thanksgiving that their turkeys were unsafe to eat because they were undercooked or had been left out too long after cooking." Hotline staff emphasize that cooked meat or poultry should be eaten or refrigerated within 2 hours after cooking. "It's also critical to break down large roasts or turkeys into smaller pieces that will cool rapidly and evenly."

Hotline staff sometimes get feedback from callers, too. Templin remembers one woman asking whether the 20 pounds of cooked meat she bought would be safe to eat after she had left it on the counter for more than the recommended 2 hours. "We told her not to eat the meat, but she decided to try it anyway. She called later to say that she had gotten very sick with stomach cramps."

The Meat and Poultry Hotline can be reached weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET at 1-800-535-4555. Callers in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area should dial (202) 447-3333. Hearing-impaired persons can reach the service by dialing either the 800 or local Washington number. ■