



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

No endorsement of AgEcon Search or its fundraising activities by the author(s) of the following work or their employer(s) is intended or implied.

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

Outlook '94

For Release: Tuesday, November 30, 1993

FOOD SAFETY INITIATIVES FOR 1994 AND BEYOND**Patricia Jensen****Deputy Assistant Secretary for
Marketing and Inspection Services**

It's a pleasure to be here today -- in the Jefferson Auditorium, but I must say it's exciting and somewhat eery in a science-fiction way to know I'm also speaking right now to people gathered in hundreds of sites throughout the country. Through space age technology, Galaxy 3 C-Band is simulcasting our session -- in "real time," as they say in "virtual reality" terms. The satellite links us with schools of agriculture, state officials, food industry representatives, nutrition and other health professionals, and consumers.

Galaxy 3 links us technologically. But the link between us is a fundamental one -- a link forged long ago when the first person produced more than was needed for subsistence and sold wheat, animals, or milk or eggs to another person. This link was forged by Nature, not by humans -- we all eat food, so, we all are consumers.

Working to enhance the safety of food -- our mission at the U.S. Department of Agriculture -- is not an abstract quest but rather is basic to survival. The deaths and illnesses from the foodborne pathogen E. coli O157:H7 tragically portrayed this reality at the very time Mike Espy was sworn in as Secretary of Agriculture. He reacted to the tragedy by moving swiftly to strengthen the safety links in the food chain.

Today, we are making progress as we seek ways to better protect consumers from foodborne pathogens and, at the same time, to see if we can learn ways to keep pathogens out of the food supply.

Eliminating pathogens from raw foods is not now possible. Bacteria -- including disease-causing ones -- are part of the natural world.

Yet, we can and must do more. In the next few minutes, I want to report on USDA's 10 months of progress since Bill Clinton became President, and point to where we are going in 1994 and beyond.

I will explain how we are strengthening links between regulatory agencies at all levels of government, how we are challenging the food industry -- from the farm to the table and the drive-thru -- and how we are reinforcing the links between the food producer, the health professional, and the consumer.

Meat and poultry inspection as you and I -- and our parents and grandparents -- have known it since 1906, has protected the consumer from threats posed by diseased animals, physical contaminants and residues. Now inspection must change. New incidents in recent months have tragically underscored the virulence of E. coli O157:H7. Stories abound about other pathogens. It is painfully clear that, today, microbiological hazards pose the greatest threat to public health from consumption of meat and poultry. It is also clear that meat and poultry inspection must change if it is to deal with microbial contaminants.

Today, in highlighting progress against pathogens, I will describe steps to teach safe handling of meat and poultry, steps we have ordered to clean up meat and poultry, unannounced reviews of plants, studies to better understand pathogens on meat and on live animals. In addition, I will also talk about HACCP, and progress as we work together to design the ideal regulatory program of the future.

You will see that from now on, consumers and industry should have little doubt that food safety will be a theme linking public health agencies. You will see that from the farm to the table, from the pitchfork to the table fork, we are going to work together to develop a new inspection system.

And, you will see that our new approach to food inspection sends a strong message. It says that food inspection must protect public health and that there can -- and will -- be no compromises.

SAFE HANDLING INSTRUCTIONS

Let us begin with a step to instruct consumers how to handle raw meat and poultry. Because the best defense against foodborne illness is to handle foods properly, Secretary Espy has directed USDA to mandate safe handling instructions on every package of fresh meat.

Under the rule we developed, meat and poultry packaged under USDA inspection as well as those packaged in supermarkets and other retail outlets will have to carry labels stating that "Some animal products may contain bacteria that could cause illness if the product is mishandled or cooked improperly."

The labels will also have to carry instructions saying the meat must be kept refrigerated or frozen and thawed safely. And, the labels will instruct food handlers to avoid cross contamination by keeping raw meat separate from other foods and by washing working surfaces, utensils, and hands after touching raw meat. The last two directions say, "cook thoroughly and refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours."

CONSUMER EDUCATION

The label is one more way to educate food handlers. USDA, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have been working together with state and local officials to increase awareness of proper sanitation and food handling practices among food preparers. Recent intensified efforts include:

- Video news releases on the new safe handling label.
- USDA worked with meat and supermarket associations on point-of-purchase materials to explain the new label and on materials to give consumers on safe handling of hamburger meat.
- On September 2, FSIS and FDA held a teleconference for state health officials to discuss the lessons learned from the E. coli outbreaks and the steps to take to prevent foodborne illnesses.
- More than 138,000 callers last year learned about food safety on USDA's toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline. Through one-on-one conversations, hotline staff answered consumers' questions and many others learned from recorded messages when the staff was not on the line.
- USDA recently issued three video news releases promoting food safety for the holidays. The videos are distributed via satellite across the country.
- USDA agencies are working together to distribute food safety information to the Food and Nutrition Service's Child Care Food Program that reaches nearly one-quarter of the Nation's children in day care and Head Start.
- Targeting efforts to educate young mothers and food handlers in restaurants and in hospitals, nursing homes, day care centers, and homeless shelters. Education is critical for those serving the most vulnerable -- the sick, the elderly, the homeless, and the young.

PATHOGEN REDUCTION EFFORTS

We know that pathogens -- not people -- are the culprits, and our many undertakings against bacterial pathogens reflect that fact.

Since last January, USDA has worked to design and put in place a far-reaching pathogen reduction program that addresses many steps in the production, distribution, and preparation of meat and poultry products. I would venture to say that our progress in the last 10 months has been more significant than what has occurred over the past 10 years.

- One of our first steps was to launch nationwide, microbial baseline studies. The studies will give us comprehensive "pictures" of microbial levels.

The first survey, which began in October 1992, will tell us about pathogens in steer and heifer slaughter plants throughout the country. One year's survey results will be announced by the end of this year.

- In September, we began a similar survey on bulls and cows, the chief source of ground meat.

- A micro baseline survey for poultry is scheduled to begin next year, and one on swine will follow.

- This Fall we began targeted microbiological studies of disabled animals and ground beef.

These studies will give us yardsticks against which to measure future efforts to reduce harmful bacteria.

Other steps or actions aimed at pathogen reduction include:

- * implementation of micro testing into pre-op sanitation inspection.

- * a pilot for micro testing at critical control points in beef slaughter and processing plants.

- * an important development, granting of direct research authority to FSIS.

- * and, an announcement spelling out the criteria for rapid microbiological tests that will be of use to the Food Safety and Inspection Service. Rapid tests to detect and count bacterial pathogens are basic to learning more about pathogens -- and enforcing rules on bacterial contamination.

-- We have outlined our needs in the Federal Register to make it easier for test developers to design accurate tests that will work in the real world of the meat plant and the kitchen.

ON-FARM SAFETY EFFORTS FOR MEAT AND POULTRY

Several USDA and PHS agencies are working together to find ways of reducing the bacterial load on animals -- before they leave the farm, or feedlot, or grow-out house. For example:

- USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is doing a risk analysis study to determine the source and incidence of E. coli O157:H7 in beef cattle. We want to determine whether the pathogen is more prevalent in dairy cows than in beef cattle.

- The involvement of APHIS in E. coli studies comes after several years' successful work tracing back the source of Salmonella enteritidis in eggs.

- USDA is also designing model on-farm programs for preventing pathogen contamination.

Our goal is to determine where and how pathogens enter the food chain -- knowledge needed before we can design intervention strategies.

ENHANCED ENFORCEMENT

Secretary Espy and I and the officials of Agencies we oversee are not only talking tough, but we are strengthening inspection oversight and enforcement.

- We have strengthened oversight with more frequent and more intense, unannounced and specially targeted reviews by a newly established Review and Assessment Office.

-- Reviews have been undertaken in beef plants and in poultry plants as well. In March, Mike Espy directed FSIS to conduct unannounced reviews at 90 beef slaughter plants.

-- In mid-November, Secretary Espy announced special reviews of 26 slaughter plants that process 64 percent of the nation's turkey production.

Although the final report is not yet completed, we can say the inspection system was working very well in most plants, but in others immediate corrective action was needed -- and was taken. Follow up investigations and reviews will ensure problems are corrected.

- We have reinforced our requirements that all fecal, ingesta, and milk contamination be trimmed from beef carcasses.

- We have begun a study to determine whether washing or trimming is more effective in removing contamination.

- We have hired 200 new inspectors, and have taken steps to increase coverage by Veterinary Inspectors in plants handling high-risk animals.

- We are writing new rules to strengthen requirements that meat and poultry plants maintain records that will help us when problems occur so that we can better trace back the sources of animals.

- We also need new laws giving the secretary greater authority to define and remove from commerce contaminated products.

- This year, we enforced new cooking and handling controls for plants making cooked, partially-cooked or char-marked ground meat products. This requires labeling of packages of meat patties that are not fully cooked, alerting the handler to "Cook until well done, for safety." The rules also call for meat plants to cool heated products quickly and to take steps to prevent raw meat from cross-contaminating product ready for packaging.

USDA COOPERATION WITH OTHER PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCIES

The Secretary and other USDA officials know that we must take steps to strengthen USDA's public health mission and provide the means to incorporate human health considerations into our policies and decision making.

- We are setting up a Public Health Division within FSIS and are working closely with the Office of the Surgeon General and others in the Public Health Service to select a physician to head the division.

- In addition to an APHIS scientist, we are about to name an FSIS scientist to serve at the Public Health Service's Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

Candidates have been interviewed and a decision is expected shortly. We saw the need for such positions during the E.coli crisis and believe they will enable our Agency to have an even closer relationship with CDC, better equipping us to stay on top of public health issues and trends relating to meat and poultry.

PUBLIC INPUT IN DESIGNING TOMORROW'S INSPECTION SYSTEM

We have been moving on the fast-track, but we know we must not make changes for the sake of change. We are committed to designing a regulatory program for the future, and we are committed to designing it based on the best thinking of all concerned -- experts, consumers, and, especially, our own employees.

- We distributed both the FSIS Strategic Plan and the Pathogen Reduction Plan widely, and we held six public hearings in May and June in different cities across the country. In all, 282 individuals presented almost 1,700 comments. Among the subject areas most discussed were inspection, communication/cooperation, consumer education, and science/research/ and technology.

The summary of public comments helped conferees who met on regulatory reform November 9 and 10 nearby in Virginia. The conference was extremely helpful, providing input from all segments of the population -- consumers, scientists, industry and many others.

- Also, I have no doubt that the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system will be important in the future.

In May, the secretary announced that meat and poultry plants will be required to have HACCP systems. Again, to ensure public participation in designing a regulatory proposal, we are planning roundtable discussions early next year.

CLOSING

In closing, I want to thank you for your kind attention. From this overview of our progress in the last 10 months, I hope you will agree that our aggressive approach to enforcement of existing rules and the designing of new approaches are, indeed, enhancing the safety of America's plentiful, nutritious food supply.

Under the direction of Secretary Mike Espy, and with full support of the President and the Vice President, we are fortifying the food safety network. And, we -- the consumers -- will all enjoy the benefits.