

**Statement by
Alfred V. Almanza
Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety
Before the House Committee on Agriculture
September 16, 2015**

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 to come before you today to discuss the Food Safety and Inspection Service, our mission, and our people.

Who We Are

FSIS is the public health agency in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (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. FSIS inspection personnel inspect each and every livestock and poultry carcass before it can enter commerce, and Agency inspectors inspect every processing plant at least once per shift. 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 approves the labels of meat, poultry, and egg products and ensures that they are truthful, not misleading, and contain the requisite information. We also take action should misbranded or economically adulterated products manage to 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). Subsequently, 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

As stated above, FSIS is mandated to have inspectors present in virtually every meat, poultry, and processed egg products plant in the country. To meet this obligation, as of September 30, 2014, the Agency employed 8,676 permanent full-time employees, including 625 in the Washington, D.C. area, and 8,051 in the field. These employees work in approximately 6,426 federally regulated establishments, three FSIS laboratories, 127 ports-of-entry, and 150,000 in-commerce facilities nationwide. During FY 2014, FSIS personnel inspected about 148 million head of livestock, 9 billion poultry carcasses, and about 3.2 billion pounds of processed egg products. In FY2014, FSIS conducted 6.84 million food safety and defense procedures and condemned over 465 million pounds of poultry and more than 205,000 head of livestock during postmortem (post-slaughter) inspection.

Federal Inspection of Exports and Imports

FSIS regulates all imported meat, poultry, and processed egg products intended for use as human food. Before FSIS-regulated products can enter the country, the Agency determines whether the food safety regulatory system of any country that wishes to export to the U.S. is equivalent to that of the U.S. Once FSIS finds a foreign country's system for meat, poultry, or egg products to be equivalent, FSIS inspects eligible products from that country at U.S. ports-of-entry.

The Agency evaluates an exporting country's food safety system on an ongoing basis. Each year, FSIS reviews any changes in the foreign country's food safety system. In addition, FSIS may conduct an in-country audit of the system and will review the country's performance in port-of-entry inspections. Based on these reviews, the Agency decides whether the country is maintaining equivalence, or whether additional action by FSIS is warranted. This performance-based approach allows FSIS to direct its resources to foreign food regulatory systems that potentially pose a risk to public health and makes its international program more consistent with its domestic inspection system. Finally, it improves the linkage between port-of-entry re-inspection and on-site audits.

State Inspection

FSIS also assesses the safety of State-inspected meat and poultry products through agreements with State Departments of Agriculture. FSIS works with 27 States to develop and administer State meat and poultry inspection (MPI) programs that implement food safety requirements that are "at least equal to" Federal requirements at more than 1,600 small and very small establishments. These establishments can only ship or sell products within their respective States. State MPI programs must ensure that livestock are treated humanely by imposing humane handling requirements that are "at least equal to" those FSIS has established under the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act of 1978.

In 2014, FSIS completed comprehensive reviews of the meat or poultry inspections programs of Kansas, Missouri, Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. The Agency also obtained self-assessment reviews of the other 21 MPI programs.

FSIS also cooperates with four States — Ohio, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Indiana — to operate a fairly new interstate shipment program, as provided for in the 2008 Farm Bill. This approach eliminates barriers and allows small State-inspected businesses to expand their customer base and explore new markets, by making these establishments eligible to ship meat and poultry products in interstate commerce.

Assistance to Small Plants

With more than 90 percent of the 6,000 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 FY2014, the Small Plant Help Desk received and responded to 2,042 inquiries in person, over the phone, and via email. In addition, FSIS publishes Compliance Guides that help small plants comply with new or modified FSIS regulations.

Strategic Planning for Accountability

Every five years, FSIS adopts a new Strategic Plan that sets out the Agency's goals and initiatives. The FSIS Strategic Plan 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 that sets out three or four key results that each of the Agency’s ten offices intends to accomplish to advance the Strategic Plan. At the end of each year, we publish a report that sets out how well we did in achieving key results.

We are now operating under our third Annual Performance Plan (APP) under the FY 2011-2016 Strategic Plan, and we have already begun drafting the Strategic Plan for FY2017-2021. 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 can be accountable to the Congress and the American public.

A major theme of our current Strategic Plan is Cultural Transformation. Cultural Transformation is a commitment to work in collaboration with USDA on civil rights and equal employment opportunities (EEO), embrace a respectful and diverse workforce, and strive for a highly effective, collaborative work environment. FSIS fosters an inclusive workforce by recruiting and hiring skilled applicants that reflect America’s diversity. FSIS eliminates barriers to equal employment and allows employees to advance based on merit. Managers and supervisors lead by example to ensure that the work environment is free from discrimination, hostility, intimidation, reprisal, and harassment.

In developing the 2017-2021 Plan, we are involving not only our headquarters leadership but employees in a range of positions across the Agency. In addition, we have consulted with external stakeholders so that we have broad input to guide our progress forward.

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 is supported by sampling programs such as testing ready-to-eat meat and poultry products for *Listeria monocytogenes*, testing for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in raw poultry, and testing for seven serogroups of pathogenic *E. coli* (including *E. coli* O157:H7) in non-intact raw beef, and by performance standards to assess how well plants are controlling these hazards.

FSIS also has recently adopted its New Poultry Inspection System regulations, which focuses the efforts of FSIS inspection personnel on food safety much more than has previously been the case. FSIS is also considering changes to how it does inspection in hog and cattle slaughter plants.

Consumer Outreach

To keep the public safe, we spend much of our time conducting outreach and educational awareness efforts to the millions of Americans who consume our products every single day. Just as FSIS is focusing on modernizing our inspection techniques, we also are modernizing the way we communicate with our consumers. We recently celebrated the 30 year anniversary of the USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, which enables 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 some great successes in consumer food safety outreach throughout FY2015 thus far. 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.

FY 2014-2015 Accomplishments

As I stated previously, FSIS's main goal is to protect the public health and reduce foodborne illness. Thus, it is a significant indication of our success that the All-Illness Measure that we have created, which combines the number of illnesses attributable to meat, poultry, or egg products caused by Salmonella, E. coli O157:H7, and Listeria, showed a reduction of about 41,000 estimated illnesses between FY2013 and FY2014, from 427,171 in FY2013 to 386,265 in FY2014. Further, in FY 2014, FSIS "met" or "exceeded" 81 percent of our annual performance measures.

Our successes have continued in FY 2015. Here are just a few of our accomplishments:

- Began the implementation of the New Poultry Inspection System after the release of the final rule;
- Asked for public comment on performance measures to reduce *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in chicken parts and comminuted poultry. These new standards could help prevent an estimated 50,000 illnesses annually;

- Issued 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 STEC in ground beef and components other than trim;
- 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;
- Strengthened humane handling in plants;
- Developed new in-plant activities, such as the new Food Safety Assessment (FSA) methodology;
- Issued a proposed rule on non-ambulatory disabled veal calves, which, if adopted, would require that veal calves that are unable to rise at the time of ante-mortem inspection be euthanized. Under the proposed rule, all non-ambulatory disabled veal calves that are brought to slaughter will be promptly and humanely euthanized, and prohibited from entering the food supply; and
- Finalized the proposed mechanically tenderized beef rule that makes 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.

Looking Forward

As we move forward, our focus on modernization also has us looking at ways to modernize inspection, improve our web-based Public Health Inspection System (PHIS), improve

our system for ensuring the safety of imports, and improve the traceability of products as they move to the consumer. As mandated by Congress, FSIS is responsible for the regulation of Siluriformes and Siluriformes products. As soon as the rule is final, we will begin taking steps to implement this inspection program. Our focus on science will increase our use of whole-genome sequencing, increased sampling, and the use of new performance standards to address Salmonella in chicken parts and comminuted poultry. We will be ensuring that plants properly validate their HACCP plans, and we intend to improve how our inspection personnel verify how sanitary dressing is done, to minimize the possibility that contamination will occur during the slaughter process. With regard to illness investigations, we are also coordinating closely with other Federal agencies, like the FDA and the CDC. Increased communication with our partner agencies makes FSIS more effective and improves our responses during recalls and outbreaks. In 2011, we created the Interagency Food Safety Analytics Collaboration (IFSAC), which brings together senior leaders and technical experts on food safety attribution from CDC, FDA, and FSIS to improve coordination of Federal food safety analytic efforts and address cross-cutting priorities for food safety data collection, analysis and use.

In FY2015, 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 200 people in attendance in-person and online, to share those findings.

These improved estimates of foodborne illness source attribution can inform efforts to prioritize food safety initiatives, interventions, and policies for reducing foodborne illnesses. These types of collaborative efforts help FSIS work with our partner agencies to ensure that food safety is better informed, better targeted, and more effective.

Conclusion

These are some of the ways we are holding ourselves accountable for achieving positive results and outcomes on critical food safety issues. We continuously track performance, modernize, and apply science in developing our approach to the problems we face.

I began my career at FSIS as a line inspector. 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.