

FOOD SAFETY AND INSPECTION SERVICE

Statement of
Alfred V. Almanza, Administrator, Food Safety and Inspection Service
Before the
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Farr, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Alfred Almanza, Administrator of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). I am pleased to appear before you today and appreciate the opportunity to discuss the fiscal year (FY) 2013 budget request for FSIS within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the status of our programs aimed at protecting public health and preventing foodborne illness.

Preventing Foodborne Illness

FSIS is responsible for the safety of meat, poultry and processed egg products. The main mission of the agency and its dedicated employees is to ensure a safe food supply, and protect consumers from foodborne illness. We take our mission very seriously and continually strive to improve the ways in which we protect public health.

Prevention is our guiding principle, and is a key element in FSIS' five-year Strategic Plan, which the Under Secretary has spoken to in more detail. It is the foundation of the modern food safety system which we are working hard to strengthen with our food safety partners. In the past few

years, FSIS has taken monumental steps to be more proactive in our approach to food safety, and adapt our policies and programs to meet modern food safety challenges.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), every year, 48 million Americans will be affected by a foodborne illness, over 128,000 of them will be hospitalized because of it, and about 3,000 will die. Those are alarming statistics, but FSIS has taken significant steps in an effort to bring down those numbers. That's why we have been very aggressive in our fight against *E. coli* O157 through the zero tolerance policy we announced in 1994, and more recent actions on non-O157 STECs identified by the Under Secretary.

There is no question that consumers have access to safer food as a result of these testing and inspection policies. I am proud to report that we met the Healthy People 2010 goal of less than one illness per 100,000 people caused by *E. coli* O157. In fact, we met that goal in 2009, but made even further progress in 2010. And according to CDC's most recent FoodNet data, *E. coli* O157 has decreased by 44 percent since the 1996-1998 baseline. The latest foodborne illness statistics also show that we are doing better in reducing the other major pathogens associated with FSIS-regulated product, with *Campylobacter* down by 27 percent, and *Listeria* down by 38 percent.

But we also know that the current system is not perfect, and are determined to make it better. We are constantly refining our testing methods and are looking at ways to improve our strategy to combat *E. coli* O157 and other pathogens. And since the incidence of *Salmonella* infections has not declined since 1996-1998, we view reducing illnesses due to this pathogen as a high-

priority goal in the agency's Strategic Plan. In July 2011, FSIS implemented stricter *Salmonella* and new *Campylobacter* performance standards for poultry products. FSIS estimates that after two years under these standards, there will be about 20,000 fewer illnesses each year from *Salmonella* standards and 5,000 illnesses avoided from *Campylobacter*.

We expect to make additional head-way in fighting *Salmonella* and other pathogens with our recent proposal to modernize the poultry slaughter inspection system. The new inspection system is aimed at reducing the risk of foodborne illness by focusing FSIS inspection activities on aspects of the poultry production system that are most directly related to food safety. FSIS estimates that the new poultry slaughter inspection system, once implemented, would lead to as many as 4,286 fewer *Salmonella*-related illnesses and 986 fewer *Campylobacter*-related illnesses per year.

Doing More With Less

In the current budget climate, FSIS has been developing innovative ways to make more efficient and effective use of taxpayer dollars. As part of the USDA's Blueprint for Stronger Service, we have taken a number of steps to make the most of the resources provided to us by the Committee. For example, we have cut our budgets for travel, printing and supplies and are consolidating cell phone plans.

More significantly, FSIS proposed a number of office consolidations to reduce administrative costs and improve organizational efficiency. Based on a thorough review and in consideration of a number of factors, FSIS determined that we can reduce the number of our District Offices from

15 to 10. This consolidation affects management and support personnel, not inspectors, and by providing greater consistency across districts, it should only strengthen FSIS' ability to protect public health. Our inspectors will continue to provide inspection in FSIS-regulated establishments in full compliance with the law. We estimate that there will be cost-savings of about \$1 million annually when fully implemented.

The new poultry slaughter inspection system, once operational, will not only be beneficial for food safety, but will also yield savings. The President's FY 2013 Budget reflects \$13 million in efficiencies that FSIS expects to gain from the proposed inspection system. It will save taxpayers more than \$90 million over three years and lower production costs for establishments at least \$256 million per year.

We recognize that the proposed inspection system will have an impact on our workforce. Many in the inspection personnel will have the opportunity to move into upgraded positions; and other positions will be eliminated through attrition and relocations over a two to three year period. However, the proposal will move some FSIS personnel in poultry plants from work that is more related to quality assurance to work that is focused completely on food safety. We believe the proposed poultry inspection system, as well as other measures the agency has taken recently are all positive steps for our workforce, putting them in a better position to more effectively prevent foodborne illness and protect public health. A modern food safety system needs a workforce that can address the needs of the 21st century.

Empowering Our Workforce

FSIS' workforce is the backbone of our agency, and without their extraordinary work we cannot accomplish a single one of our very important food safety tasks, some of which I mentioned earlier in my testimony. We are inspectors, scientists, epidemiologists, investigators, educators and communicators stationed throughout the country, all dedicated and working toward one single purpose, protecting the health of more than 300 million Americans.

The empowerment of the FSIS workforce is imperative in our efforts to become a better food safety agency. As Dr. Hagen has said, we are only as effective as our dedicated workforce. Thus, we are committed to providing our workforce with the knowledge, tools and resources to better protect public health. This commitment to our employees is reflected in our Strategic Plan for the next five years, which the agency is working to accomplish through improved training, innovative use of technology, and offering more avenues for feedback.

Training for the FSIS workforce is a cornerstone of public health protection. FSIS can only achieve our public health mission by preparing our workforce with scientific and technical training that reflects the agency's constantly evolving approach to food safety. Our workforce training strategy includes providing entry-level training on mission-critical inspection skills to new employees, followed by additional training as policy is updated to reinforce knowledge about how to perform public health protection duties.

A good example of this approach would be how FSIS recently issued new instructions to inspection personnel in order to clarify that all non-ambulatory mature cattle must be condemned

and promptly euthanized and to ensure that they are humanely handled, regardless of the reason for the animals' non-ambulatory status. The clarification is intended to ensure that the policy is consistently applied at all FSIS-inspected establishments.

To complement the new humane handling instructions, FSIS is delivering enhanced, situation-based humane handling training. The situation-based training presents inspection personnel with realistic scenarios that they may encounter when verifying humane handling activities. It will help the agency enforce humane handling regulations more effectively and consistently. The approximately 4,000 FSIS personnel who perform humane handling verification duties at livestock slaughter establishments have completed the first training module on animal handling from truck unloading to stunning, and will complete the second and final training module, on stunning effectiveness and post-stunning considerations, this month.

In addition, FSIS offers tailored training for the various activities performed by our employees. For example, we offer a 3-week course designed for employees responsible for surveillance, investigations and enforcement activities. And for our newly hired public health veterinarians, we run a 9-week program that trains them to effectively work as part of an in-plant team in slaughter and processing establishments.

To foster career development, FSIS recently launched an initiative called the Learning Trove. One of the major goals of the initiative is to facilitate knowledge transfer by agency experts to an interested community of learners through mentorship.

Additionally, with the launch of the Public Health Information System (PHIS) last year, the agency developed and delivered PHIS training to more than 5,700 employees in the field. The course lasted two weeks and included click-by-click training on how to enter data into PHIS screens and agency policy updates. Training is a crucial component of the utility of PHIS, as the data FSIS employees enter into the system will be used by the agency to get ahead of outbreaks and recalls and better protect consumers.

PHIS, when fully deployed and functional, is technology that will empower our employees to be better prepared for the work that they do every day, as they will have a wealth of the most up-to-date data all in one place and at their finger-tips. PHIS is an intelligent system that will allow employees to use the data in the system to make more informed decisions to keep our nation's food supply safe. The agency's transition to PHIS is part of our efforts to become a more modern agency, keeping up with the latest technology and food safety challenges.

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.

Since the launch, we have uploaded important data to PHIS, streamlined the way that data is stored and organized to increase the speed of the system, launched a disconnected version of PHIS for inspection personnel to use when internet connection is unavailable, and transitioned to electronic sampling. We are also vigorously working to find solutions to establish solid internet connectivity for employees stationed at establishments in rural areas. At the same time, we are

making constant improvements to the disconnected version of PHIS so that it works effectively for employees in these areas.

We are already starting to see the system's benefits to public health come to fruition. With PHIS, we now know more about establishment operations, volumes, HACCP plans, and other food safety programs. There has also been an increase in the number of scheduled laboratory samples being taken at establishments as a result of PHIS' electronic sampling feature.

FSIS continues to work hard to make PHIS a useful tool for our employees, as well as our stakeholders. I can say with confidence that the agency is in a good place with PHIS implementation and we wouldn't be able to do this without the valuable feedback and contributions of our employees.

The agency is committed to engaging with our workforce and reaching out to our employees to regularly ask for feedback on significant policy and program initiatives. Their feedback has been critical for the success of these initiatives. For example, the feedback we have received from employees on PHIS has been instrumental in improving the system and completing full domestic implementation. At FSIS, we believe that keeping open channels of communication within the agency, including aggressively seeking feedback from our employees, is critical to create a workforce that is committed and unified in one mission--protecting public health.

In an effort to maintain a constant flow of information through all levels of the agency, FSIS offers various avenues to facilitate communication. In FY 2011, we held 7 all-employee town

hall meetings and 7 town hall meetings in the field, all of which have had record participation from our employees. I also have a blog, where I encourage employees to comment and give me their thoughts on a range of agency issues.

Modernizing our approach to food safety doesn't just mean an evolution in our policies and programs. It also means improving our agency as a whole, to one that empowers employees to see that they have a fundamental role in the delivery of our food safety mission.

Putting Our Plan into Action

In September 2011, FSIS unveiled our Strategic Plan for FY 2011 through FY 2016. Dr. Hagen has discussed the specifics of the plan, but let me stress that it was put together by our employees and is meant to serve as their roadmap to accomplish FSIS' mission of keeping food safe and protecting the American public we serve. The plan outlines detailed strategies and measureable goals to reduce foodborne illness. With this plan, each and every employee at FSIS is accountable to the public for protecting them from foodborne illness. But it also empowers our employees to succeed by setting out eight clear and measurable goals to support three overarching themes: prevent foodborne illness; empower people and strengthen infrastructure, and understand and influence the farm-to-table continuum.

Reinforcing the Strategic Plan is our Annual Performance Plan for FY 2012. Our employees are responsible for producing results, and meeting the corporate performance measures we have set for ourselves. In order to effectively manage and demonstrate the progress we're making with each of our eight strategic goals, we have created an online tracking tool called a Dashboard.

Designated employees from each office will go into the Dashboard on a regular basis to document the actions we are taking to accomplish our strategic goals. The Dashboard will allow the agency to assess how well we're doing on our performance measures. The progress we're making with each goal will be easily identifiable by color, with green indicating we have achieved our measures, yellow indicating we're close, and red indicating that we still have more work to do.

The Strategic Plan demonstrates our commitment to becoming a more effective food safety agency, one that focuses on prevention, adaptable to modern food safety challenges, and accountable to the American public. We have taken a number of very significant steps recently to prevent foodborne illness and protect public health, and have set very high expectations for what we'd like to accomplish in this coming fiscal year.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Farr, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your help in keeping the food supply safe and protecting the American public from foodborne illness. On behalf of the workforce I represent and serve, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.