

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 Members of the Subcommittee, I am Dr. Elisabeth Hagen, Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). With me is Al Almanza, Administrator of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the status of the Agency's programs and policies.

When I appeared before this Subcommittee last March, I unveiled the FSIS Strategic Plan, which set specific goals for FY 2011-2016, including annual benchmarks for reducing the number of illnesses from *Salmonella*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, and *E. coli* O157:H7 that are attributed to meat and poultry products. Before highlighting some of our progress toward these goals, I would like to outline our efforts to mitigate the effects of sequestration on our public health mission and on the industry that we regulate.

Sequestration and Our Mission

Because final FY 2013 funding figures have yet to be determined, FSIS is not able to predict the exact amount that will be sequestered. However, based on assumptions by the Office of Management and Budget, the projected FSIS reduction would be \$52.8 million.

By law, FSIS is required to examine and inspect all livestock and poultry slaughtered and processed for use in commerce for human food, and 8,678, or more than 88 percent, of the dedicated men and women that FSIS employed at the end of FY 2012 were protecting public health in 6,263 federally regulated establishments and elsewhere on the front lines nationwide.

Eighty percent of total FSIS funding is applied toward salaries and benefits, primarily for in-plant and other frontline personnel. An additional 15 percent is allocated to frontline travel, fixed support costs, and other inspection services; the remaining five percent of the Agency's budget is for supplies and operating expenses. Given this formula of the Agency's budget allocations, furloughs would be unavoidable under a \$52.8 million sequestration scenario, implemented at such an advanced stage in the fiscal year.

I would like to emphasize that furloughs will affect all FSIS employees; not just frontline inspectors. Restricting furloughs to non-frontline personnel would not generate a large enough cut to meet the sequestration target. Therefore, the current plan is for an across-the-board furlough for all employees for 11 days. Also, in order to minimize the impact on our employees, consumers, and industry, it is our intention to apply the furloughs on non-consecutive days to the maximum extent possible based on available time remaining in the fiscal year.

USDA and FSIS have been taking extraordinary measures to reduce expenditures, including generating millions of dollars in efficiencies and significantly reducing the number of conferences and travel. While these cost-savings measures have produced noteworthy results, they do not attain the level of reduction required to meet the sequestration target.

Implementation of Statutory Requirements

Despite these funding challenges, FSIS continues to meet our statutory obligations. For example, FSIS implemented Section 11015 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 on August 8, 2012, when the Agency signed its first cooperative interstate shipment agreement with Ohio. FSIS also signed new agreements with two other States, North Dakota and Wisconsin, on January 11 and January 14, 2013. So far under these agreements, four Ohio establishments and one North Dakota establishment have shipped State-inspected and USDA-marked meat and poultry products across State lines.

Salmonella

In addition to meeting our statutory obligations, we are constantly asking ourselves how we can better protect consumers.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in January that over the last few years, rates of foodborne *Salmonellosis* have remained stagnant. Our estimates of *Salmonella* illness from FSIS-regulated products mirror this trend, despite recent interventions and significant improvement in contamination rates measured by our verification testing. These numbers show that we must better align our activities with food safety risks. A multi-faceted effort will be necessary in order to achieve reductions in *Salmonella* rates.

This past December, we set new requirements for establishments to reassess their Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) plans for ground poultry products. Companies producing raw ground poultry products will be required to reassess their HACCP plans to account for several *Salmonella* outbreaks that were associated with those types of products over the past few years. This will improve a company's ability to identify hazards and better prevent foodborne illness.

We also are in the process of developing a raw chicken parts baseline that targets reducing *Salmonella* rates in other poultry products. This microbiological baseline study will provide us with important data on the prevalence and quantitative levels of certain foodborne pathogens, such as *Salmonella*, and microorganisms.

Modernization to Improve Food Safety

Another important method for preventing *Salmonella* illnesses is to align inspection with risk by modernizing poultry slaughter inspection. Our proposed inspection system would focus inspection on areas of poultry production that will have the biggest impact on public health. Currently, FSIS in-plant personnel perform quality assurance tasks such as looking for visible defects, but they are unable to detect invisible pathogens and microbes this way. Therefore, in establishments that choose to operate under this proposed new inspection system, FSIS would focus on critical food safety tasks, such as pathogen testing and verifying HACCP and sanitation standard operating procedures, and the quality assurance tasks would be turned over to the company. FSIS would continue to inspect every carcass, as required by law. We estimate that

the new poultry inspection system would avert about 5,000 illnesses from *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* each year.

The need for modernizing our food safety system is evident. As pathogens evolve, and as our scientific knowledge of what causes food-borne illness improves, we must ensure that our food safety system and our inspection process responds to these challenges. Scientific assumptions that were apparent in the 1950s, when the Poultry Products Inspection Act was first enacted, are no longer valid, so we must ensure that our regulatory tools correspond with current knowledge.

This is why modernizing the poultry inspection system is so important. Updating our inspection process would help the Agency prevent foodborne illness more effectively and efficiently.

The implementation of the Public Health Information System (PHIS) also provides us with another important decision-making tool to enable us to protect public health more effectively, efficiently, and rapidly. This easy-to-use, web-based system integrates our data sources to support a comprehensive, timely and reliable data-driven approach to inspection that allows FSIS to identify food safety threats and emerging trends more rapidly and accurately. In January 2012, FSIS completed a full implementation of the domestic component of the system, and we began implementation of the import component in spring 2012. In addition, after conducting three industry pilots and internal testing, FSIS began a staggered implementation of PHIS to industry users on February 25, 2013.

Until we can ensure that no contaminated product is ever released into commerce, we must also align our in-commerce activities, such as traceback investigations, with risks. For example, FSIS is developing a proposed rule to require retail operations to maintain accurate grinding records of source materials and particular practices, which would greatly improve the Agency's ability to trace products from retail back to slaughter facilities.

Targeting Resources

In addition to improving food safety, we must be good stewards of taxpayer money, and that is why FSIS continues to examine ways to target resources where they can be most effective.

For example, we estimate that modernization of poultry slaughter inspection would save taxpayers approximately \$90 million over a three-year period after implementation begins. FSIS also believes that participating establishments will see lower production costs resulting in a shared benefit to consumers and industry of about \$250 million annually.

Leveraging Resources

While our primary focus is preventing foodborne illness by ensuring that industry produces safe food, we can also improve food safety by collaborating with our Federal partners and educating consumers.

For example, we have met with our stakeholders to discuss about ways that we can promote good pre-harvest practices that will reduce the likelihood of contamination at slaughter. We also work with our Federal food safety partners to share food safety expertise and best practices.

In addition to doing everything we can to ensure the safety of meat, poultry and processed egg products before they get to the store shelves, we feel it is also our responsibility to provide consumers with the tools they need to handle food safely at home.

That is why FSIS, CDC, and FDA teamed up with the Ad Council to launch a national public service campaign called *Food Safe Families*, which educates consumers about the risks of foodborne illness and how to prevent it. For an investment of \$2.8 million, the Ad Council has been able to run a national TV, radio, and print ad campaign worth an estimated \$46 million.

To better reach consumers and ensure that our food safety messages are better received by a larger audience, FSIS also utilizes various social and new media platforms to reach out about key food safety messages, such as recalls and safe food handling practices.

FSIS actively disseminates food safety messages through its virtual food safety expert, Ask Karen; Twitter; Facebook; Blogs; and YouTube, and the followers are growing exponentially. The number of views of Ask Karen answers increased from 444,000 in FY 2011 to more than 1.1

million in FY 2012. The @USDAFoodSafety Twitter account had 332,600 followers at the end of FY 2012, representing a 66 percent increase over FY 2011. We are currently able to reach more than 390,000 followers with each tweet, and that number grows by about 2,000 weekly.

Conclusion

We are continually assessing whether we are doing our best to prevent foodborne illnesses in the most effective and efficient way possible. Government can deliver more than people expect, and we are committed to doing so.

We at the Office of Food Safety and FSIS are one team, with one purpose, working toward a common and extremely important goal. I am proud to lead the FSIS workforce in its mission to protect public health.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I look forward to your questions.