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2001 Butterfield Road
Downers Grove, IL 60515
(630) 512-1000
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Refrigerated Prepared Foods

March 22, 1999

Attn.: Ms. Diane Moore, Docket Clerk
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food Safety and Inspection Service
Cotton Annex - Room 102
300 12th St., S. W.
Washington, DC 20250-3700

RE: Policy on beef products contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7

Dear Ms. Moore:

ConAgra Refrigerated Prepared Foods, operates as Armour Swift-Eckrich Consumer Products, Armour Swift-Eckrich Deli/Foodservice Company, Butterball Turkey Company, National Foods, Decker, and Cook's. These companies produce and distribute primarily processed meat and poultry products, deli meats, pork, and turkey products in the United States and international markets. Our well known brands include Armour, Brown 'N Serve, Butterball, Decker, Eckrich, Healthy Choice, Hebrew National, Longmont, Schrieber, Swift Premium, Texas Signature and Webber's. Although our companies do not produce ground beef we are concerned about appropriate regulatory requirements.

The meat industry has always realized the importance of and focused on the quality of their products. Food safety is a top priority. Our company and the industry continue to focus resources both to ensure the safety of our processes and products and to meet food safety objectives including the control of pathogens. It is important to remember however, that a cooperative effort from farm to consumer will be required to achieve a reduction in the number of outbreaks and sporadic cases due to *E. coli* O157:7 in ground beef and protect the health and welfare of consumers.

We recommend that APHIS commit resources to control incidence on the farm. HACCP is an effective program and ensures focus on food safety. This system has not yet been taken to the farm. Technologies should also be explored and developed to control the organism at the farm and feedlot level. A concerted educational program should be made available to producers based upon this research. Testing should be implemented under a HACCP protocol by producers.

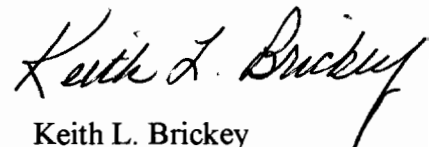
Enough testing has been done to determine *E. coli* O157:H7 is a very elusive organism. It occurs in very minute quantities. Considering the low incidence, it is doubtful that the FSIS sampling program, alone, would have a measurable impact on the number of cases attributable to *E. coli* O157:H7. However the FSIS program does send a strong message to industry and consumers as to its expectations.

It is unfortunate that the current results of testing when done by large grinding processes are used to assess liability and do not take in to account practices occurring at the sampling site. FSIS in establishing meaningful public policy can encourage the industry by ensuring plant's microbial sampling programs are aggressive and findings can be examined and interpreted recognizing the nature of the organism. A position concerning realistic Food Safety Objectives and an acknowledgment of consumer risk is critical to maintain agency integrity.

Effective policy should be based upon a scientific risk assessment. This may lead to a better understanding of the factors influencing the risk of *E. coli* O157:H7 and where appropriate microbiological sampling can be applied. It should also define the relative value of sampling as a means to satisfy the desired food safety objectives. For example it may be determined carcass sampling might be a critical part of a plant's control system and a measure of the effectiveness of the intervention steps. The industry should be encouraged to conduct tests to determine if data are useful when taken as early as possible in the process flow and examined over time.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit comments and recommendations relevant to the Agency's policy.

Yours truly,



Keith L. Brickey
Vice President
Quality Assurance