Draft Assessment of the Relative Risk to Public Health from Foodborne *Listeria monocytogenes* Among Selected Categories of Ready-to-Eat Foods

I. INTRODUCTION

The U. S. DHHS Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (FDA/CFSAN) conducted this risk assessment in collaboration with the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), and in consultation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The purpose of this assessment is to systematically examine available scientific data and information in order to estimate the predicted relative risk of serious illness and death that may be associated with consumption of different types of ready-to-eat foods that may be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. This examination of current science and the models developed are among the tools that food safety regulatory agencies will consider using to evaluate the effectiveness of current policies, programs and regulatory practices that will minimize the public health impact of this pathogenic microorganism. This assessment provides a comprehensive assessment and attempts to improve upon previously published assessments that related foodborne exposure to human listeriosis (Lindquist and Westöö, 2000, Buchanan *et al.*, 1997; Farber *et al.*, 1996; Haas *et al.*, 1999; Hitchins, 1995 and 1996; and Teufel and Bendzulla, 1993).

This risk assessment estimates the potential levels of consumer exposure to foodborne *Listeria monocytogenes* from different types of ready-to-eat (RTE) foods (including seafood, vegetables, fruit, dairy products, and meats), and characterizes the likely impact of this exposure on public health. Included is an evaluation of the impact of foodborne *L. monocytogenes* on the health of three age-based subpopulations, two of which are vulnerable groups that were distinguished based on FoodNet surveillance data.

- Perinatal: This subpopulation includes fetuses and neonates from 16 weeks after fertilization to 30 days postpartum. These are pregnancy-associated cases where exposure occurs most often *in utero* as a result of foodborne *L. monocytogenes* infections of the mothers during pregnancy. Manifestations include spontaneous abortions, stillbirths, and neonatal infections.

- Elderly: This subpopulation includes individuals who are 60 or more years of age. This group is considered to have increased susceptibility to listeriosis due, in part, to physiological changes associated with the natural aging process.
- Intermediate-Age: Because there are insufficient data to separate the remaining population into discrete subpopulations, this group includes the remaining population, both healthy individuals (with very low risk of severe illness or death from *L. monocytogenes*) and certain susceptible subpopulations. The subpopulations include individuals with increased susceptibility to listeriosis, such as AIDS patients or individuals taking drugs that suppress the immune systems (*e. g*., cancer or transplant drugs). Individuals within these subpopulations account for most of the cases of listeriosis within the intermediate-age group.

DHHS/FDA and USDA/FSIS announced their intent to conduct a risk assessment of the public health impact of *L. monocytogenes* from food in the *Federal Register* (US DHHS, 1999a). At that time, the public was invited to comment on the planned assessment and submit scientific data and information for use in the assessment. The advice and recommendations of the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods (NACMCF) were sought on the assumptions and the risk assessment model structure to be used (US DHHS, 1999b, 1999c). During the conduct of this risk assessment, FDA and FSIS solicited the technical advice and opinions of scientific experts in various disciplines. In addition, critical review of this risk assessment model and a December 1999 draft document was solicited and received from members of the Interagency Risk Assessment Consortium and other government employees.

A chronology of the technical and scientific review involved in the development of this *L. monocytogenes* risk assessment is provided in Appendix 1.

Background

A series of illness outbreaks associated with the consumption of coleslaw, pasteurized milk, and fresh soft cheese in the early 1980s led to the recognition of *L. monocytogenes* as a foodborne pathogen.

In 1991, the NACMCF presented its analysis of the emerging problem and its recommendations to FSIS, FDA and other U. S. government agencies (NACMCF, 1991). The NACMCF recommended control strategies to minimize the presence, survival, and multiplication of *L. monocytogenes* in foods. These control strategies included the development of an effective surveillance system for listeriosis, targeted efforts on specific foods, and the use of HACCP-based (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) programs to ensure the safety of foods from processing to consumption.

Major efforts by industry and regulatory agencies during the early 1990s reduced the incidence of listeriosis by approximately 50%. However, further reductions in illness have eluded the industry's food safety efforts, in part because of the unique challenges associated with controlling this pathogen. Several barriers to its control include:

- The microorganism is commonly found in the environment, including food processing, distribution, and retail environments, in foods, and in the home.
- It primarily affects a small segment of the population that has heightened susceptibility.
- It can grow slowly in many foods during refrigerated storage.
- It is more resistant than most bacteria to the conditions and treatments used to control foodborne pathogens.

Current Policies

Based on the known characteristics of this microorganism and the disease, FDA maintains a policy of "zero-tolerance" for *L. monocytogenes* in ready-to-eat foods. This means that the detection of any *L. monocytogenes* in either of two 25-gram samples of a food renders the food adulterated as defined by the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, 21 U.S.C. 342(a)(1) (Anonymous, 1998; Shank *et al.*, 1996). This policy was affirmed in the 1995 U.S. District court decision, United States v. Union Cheese Co. (Anonymous, 1995).

FSIS's "zero-tolerance" policy applies to the detection of *L. monocytogenes* in ready-to-eat products (i.e., products that may be consumed without any further cooking or reheating). If meat or poultry products are contaminated with *L. monocytogenes*, the products are adulterated under the provisions of the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Inspection Act, 21 U.S.C. 601(m) or 453 (g), respectively (Anonymous, 1994).

Other countries, including some major trading partners of the U. S., have different policies for dealing with *L. monocytogenes* contamination. Countries such as Canada and Denmark have a "non-zero tolerance" for *L. monocytogenes* for some classes of foods (ICMSF, 1994). For example, in Canada, ready-to-eat (RTE) foods that have not been associated with an outbreak and do not allow any growth of *L. monocytogenes* during a 10-day period of refrigerated storage, may contain up to 100 *L. monocytogenes* organisms per gram of food (Health Canada, 1994). Denmark has six classes of foods with various criteria for *L. monocytogenes*. In raw RTE foods, for example, two of five samples can contain between 10 and 100 organisms per gram, but no sample can exceed 100 organisms per gram.

Healthy People 2010 Initiative

The commitment of FDA, FSIS, and CDC to reduce foodborne listeriosis is formally recognized as a national public health goal in the Healthy People 2010 initiative coordinated by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (US DHHS). The federal government established a goal of working with industry, and the public health and the research communities to achieve an additional 50% reduction in listeriosis by 2010. "Healthy People" is a national health promotion and disease prevention initiative that brings together national, state, and local government agencies; nonprofit, voluntary, and professional organizations; and businesses, communities, and individuals to improve the health of all Americans, eliminate disparities in health, and improve years and quality of healthy life (US DHHS, 2000).

Recently, the President called on federal food safety regulatory agencies to consider control of listeriosis a priority initiative and to achieve the proposed 50% reduction by 2005. On May 5, 2000, the President directed USDA Secretary Glickman and DHHS Secretary Shalala to accelerate activities with the objective of meeting the Healthy People 2010 goal in 2005.

The President directed USDA and DHHS to report back within 120 days on the "aggressive steps [they would] take to significantly reduce the risk of illness and death by *Listeria monocytogenes*." The directive also acknowledged that to address this serious public health problem, DHHS, in cooperation with USDA, was conducting this risk assessment on *L. monocytogenes* to determine which foods warrant further preventive measures.

Risk Assessment Overview

This risk assessment follows the risk assessment structure of the Joint Food and Agriculture Organization/World Health Organization Expert Consultation on the Application of Risk Analysis to Food Standards Issues (Joint FAO/WHO, 1995). The structure consists of four components: (1) hazard identification, (2) exposure assessment, (3) hazard characterization, and (4) risk characterization. Hazard identification is defined by the consultation as the identification of known or potential health effects associated with a particular biological, chemical, or physical agent. Exposure assessment is the qualitative and/or quantitative evaluation of the degree of intake likely to occur. Hazard characterization is the qualitative and/or quantitative evaluation of the nature of the adverse effects associated with biological, chemical, and physical agents that may be present in food. Finally, risk characterization is the integration of hazard identification, hazard characterization, and exposure assessment into an estimation of the adverse effects likely to occur in a given subpopulation, including attendant uncertainties.

Microbiological risk assessments generally use the same conceptual framework developed for chemical risk assessments (ICMSF, 1994). However, while there are many similarities between chemical and microbial risk assessments, there are also differences. At this time, the major concern with microbiological hazards is an acute illness from a single exposure, rather than illness from a low level, chronic exposure. Even so, sequelae and other long-term effects are beginning to be recognized for some microorganisms, but knowledge is still limited in this area. In this microbial risk assessment, the infectious unit is a single microorganism. Low levels of microorganisms (rather than low concentrations of a chemical substance) characterize the frequency of occurrence. Another difference between microbial and chemical hazards is that the level of a microorganism in a food can change, while chemical concentrations usually remain constant. This change in microbial levels should be accounted for in a microbial risk assessment's model. Human exposure levels to a pathogen in a food can rapidly increase by a million-fold within even a relatively short period of temperature abuse. Conversely, heating food immediately before consumption can reduce pathogen levels to a negligible risk. These biological characteristics of bacteria require the inclusion of detailed modeling steps in the exposure assessment. There is usually little question as to the hazard of microbial pathogens, although the dose-response relationships may not have been adequately described.

Figure I-1 provides an overview of the structure of this risk assessment. Additional details concerning the structure and modeling techniques used in this risk assessment are provided in Appendix 2.

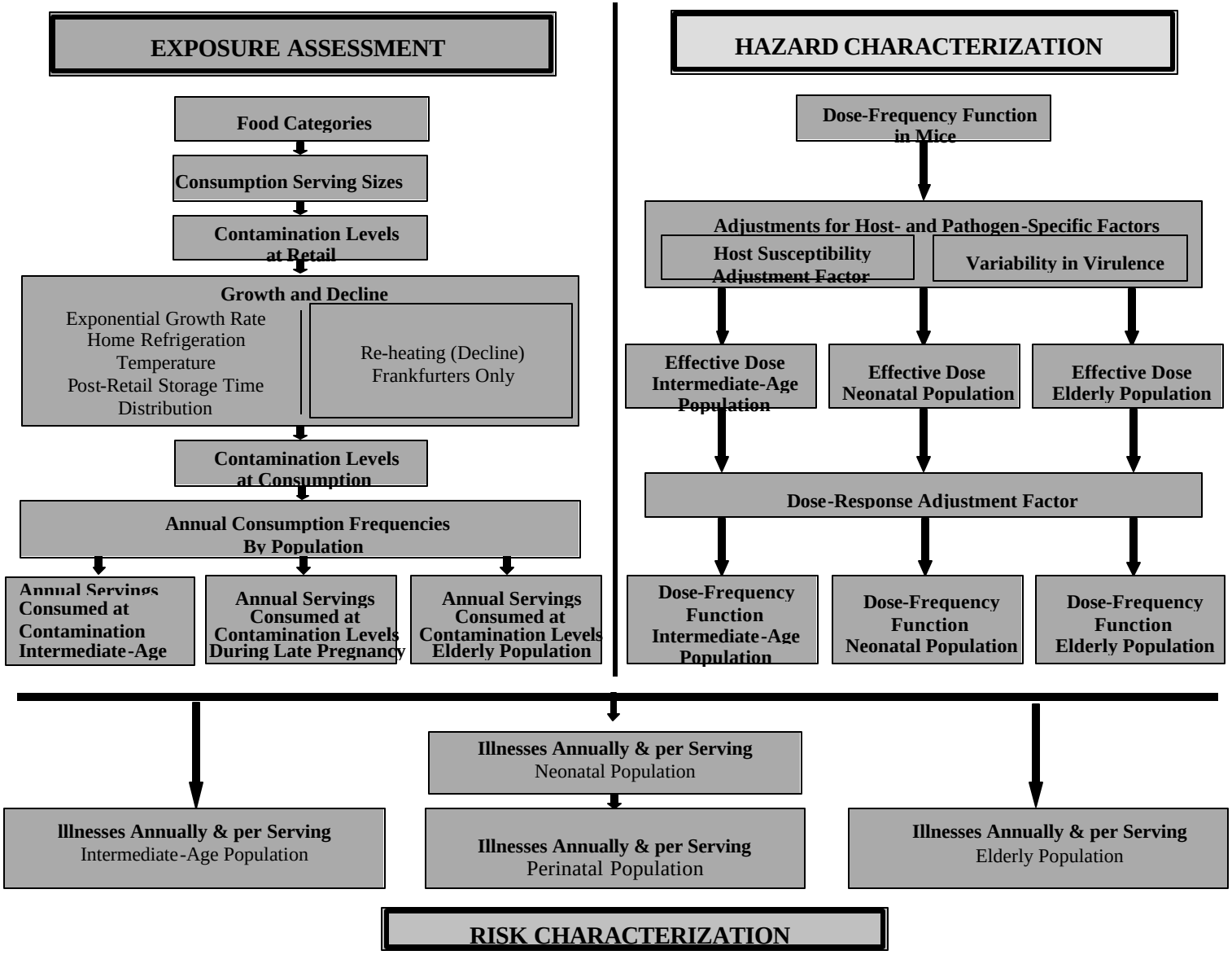

Figure I-1. Overview of the *Listeria monotogenes* Risk Assessment.