

By Maxine Hillary

food safety in a

Markets

We've all heard the news reports that highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza, or bird flu, outbreaks are still affecting parts of Asia, Europe, the Near East and Africa, and that human infections from direct contact with infected birds continue to occur. From the outset, the Food Safety and Inspection Service has been preparing to respond to any concerns the public might have about the safety of domestic poultry. While the threat of an incident of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza is not entirely remote, the U.S. Department of Agriculture continues its work to significantly reduce the chance of infected birds being imported commercially into the United States.

Lowering this risk does not come without considerable effort. Karen Stuck, FSIS Assistant Administrator for the Office of International Affairs, is charged with ensuring that products coming into the United States from other countries are safe for consumers.

Exporting a meat, poultry or egg product into the United States isn't easy, according to Stuck. Products may be imported only from those countries meeting strict criteria. Furthermore, FSIS import inspectors ensure that USDA's restrictions on imports of certain meat and poultry products are enforced, such as poultry products from countries and/or regions where highly pathogenic avian influenza has been detected.

"A country is approved for export on the basis of having an inspection program that is equivalent to the U.S. system. Many countries adopt the same system we have, but we still look at their laws and regulations to

make sure that their system is actually equivalent to ours," she said.

A legal review is followed by random FSIS visits to a country's plants to ensure that their systems are equivalent. FSIS officials verify that food safety, sanitation and humane handling standards of a country's inspection system are, in fact, being met. After a country becomes eligible to export to the United States, product still must pass another inspection at the U.S. port of entry. FSIS inspection program personnel use a computer system to randomly select labeled boxes for physical examination to verify that what is in the box is accurately stated on the label and to ensure that the product is safe and wholesome.

International trade is essential to the U.S. economy. Although U.S. production of meat, poultry and egg products can satisfy America's market, "it's still a good

Did you know?

- ▶ FSIS employs about 74 inspectors to monitor food brought into the United States from foreign destinations.
- ▶ Customs has hundreds of entry points, and much of the meat and poultry imported into the United States can come through

any of them. It then needs to go to an import inspection facility. These facilities are located at about 30 border locations.

- ▶ Imports are inspected in official import establishments as opposed to boats, planes or trains.
- ▶ The United States imports more than \$8.5 billion worth of meat, poultry and egg products each year.

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idea to allow other countries to export to the United States,” said Stuck. “We import so we can export —trade works two ways. For a lot of countries, if you are not going to import their products, they are not going to import yours.”

In all, about 38 countries are permitted to export meat, poultry and egg products to the United States. “For some U.S. trading partners,” said Stuck, “the American market is all important.”


Another organization working to ensure the safety of imported food is the Codex Alimentarius Commission, or Codex, created in 1963 by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization to develop food standards, guidelines and codes of practice. Codex’s main purposes are protecting public health and ensuring fair trade practices.

“While Codex standards are not enforceable like laws, adhering to them is good business,” said Paulo Almeida, Associate Manager for the U.S. Codex office at FSIS. “The idea is that if there is a global consensus on what a particular standard for a food product should be, then, if a producer of that product meets the standard for one country, the producer meets the standard for all countries.”

The Commission alternates meeting sites between Rome and Geneva, but much of the “real” work goes on before Codex delegates even arrive.

“We work on consultation on the technical level and get a pretty good sense of where we are going,” said Almeida. “Then we take it to a committee chaired by the USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety.”

The Under Secretary’s counterparts from the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Commerce and the Environmental Protection Agency come to an agreement. “By the time the U.S. delegate gets to a Codex meeting, he or she knows what to promote and support and also has options with which to negotiate,” said Almeida. “It’s not all or nothing.”

So whether the issue is avian flu or determining whether another country’s inspection system is equivalent to the U.S. system, Americans who consume imported beef, poultry and egg products can be confident that the products are safe, regardless of their origin. Likewise FSIS, working with global partners on Codex issues, will remain engaged in a dialogue that will ensure the safety of meat, poultry and egg products imported from other countries. 

- ▶ Approximately 6 to 8 percent of meat consumed in the United States comes from outside our borders.
- ▶ In 2006, 44 percent of the meat and poultry products imported to the United States came from Canada.
- ▶ The United States imports more eggs than it raises here. Most of these imports are

processed into low-cholesterol egg substitutes or commercial eggs prepared for restaurants and other institutional settings such as hospitals.

- ▶ FSIS inspectors have seized products such as fish balls, squid, tilapia and frog legs disguised as eligible meat and poultry products at U.S. ports of entry.