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Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division

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Congressional Committees

Subject: Food Safety: Fundamental Changes Needed to Improve Food Safety

Recent outbreaks of foodborne illness have once again raised questions about the safety of the U.S. food supply. Last month, a number of illnesses caused by hamburger contaminated with *E.coli* 0157:H7 resulted in the subsequent recall of 25 million pounds of ground beef patties and the closing of a major meat processing facility. In 1996, and again in 1997, outbreaks of foodborne illness were traced to raspberries imported from Guatemala that were contaminated with *cyclospora*, a parasite. More recently, in April of this year, a hepatitis A outbreak was traced to contaminated strawberries that were served as part of the federal school lunch program. The recent outbreaks are not a new phenomenon but only well-publicized examples of a much more widespread and ongoing problem. In May 1996, we reported that between 6.5 million and 81 million cases of foodborne illness and as many as 9,100 related deaths occur each year. (GAO/RCED-96-96).

To address the public's concern over the safety of the food supply, the Congress will undoubtedly be considering a number of actions. In this context, we want to bring to your attention the findings and recommendations expressed in a number of GAO reports on the food safety issue. Our work has pointed time and again to the need to address this issue at a very fundamental level. The natural inclination to react to each event with a patch here and a band-aid there has not proven to be an effective long-term solution. As discussed in summary form below and more fully in the reports listed in enclosure I, our work suggests that more basic actions need to be taken. In particular, we have recommended that the highly fragmented federal food safety structure needs to be replaced with a uniform, risk-based inspection system under a single food safety agency. While some administrative actions can be taken to improve the system, the kinds of fundamental changes that we believe are needed will require legislative action.

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The existing federal system to ensure a safe food supply is fragmented, characterized by a complex maze of often inconsistent legal and regulatory requirements implemented by 12 different federal agencies. Of the 12 agencies, 6 have major roles in carrying out food safety and quality activities. This structure necessitates extensive coordination efforts to minimize wasteful duplication of effort, prevent gaps in regulatory coverage, and avoid conflicting actions. However, as might be expected, our work has shown that the responsible agencies have not always been successful. Unsanitary and other unsafe conditions persist in some food processing plants, in part, because coordination efforts have broken down. (GAO/RCED-91-19A, GAO/RCED-91-19B, and GAO/RCED-92-152).

Our work has also shown that inconsistencies and illogical differences between the agencies' approaches and enforcement authorities undercut the system's effectiveness. How frequently a food processing plant is inspected and what actions are taken to enforce food safety standards are determined not by a unified, comprehensive assessment of the risk that specific food products pose to public health but by the legislation that governs the responsible agency. For example, under current federal law, federal inspectors must examine each meat and poultry carcass slaughtered—about 7 billion annually—and visit each of the approximately 5,900 meat and poultry processing plants at least once during each operating shift. For most other foods, however, the frequency of inspections is not mandated; thus, the inspection rate for foods other than meat and poultry has slipped from an average of once every 3 to 5 years in 1992 to once every 8 years in 1994, to once every 10 years, according to current estimates. (GAO/RCED-94-110).

Past efforts to correct deficiencies in the federal food safety inspection system have fallen short, in part, because they did not address the fundamental problems in the system. Agencies continue to operate under different regulatory approaches, have widely disparate budgets and staffs, lack the flexibility needed to respond to changing consumption patterns and emerging food safety issues, and are hampered by laws designed to address the food safety concerns that existed at the turn of the century, not those that our nation faces today. As we have previously reported, a new structure for food safety inspection and enforcement, based on uniform enforcement authorities and an assessment of the risk that food products pose, is needed. (GAO/RCED-92-152, GAO/RCED-94-192, and GAO/T-RCED-94-223).

Federal regulations issued in July 1996 require meat and poultry plants to use a scientific system called Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) to ensure the safety of their products. The system will be phased in over an

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18- to 42-month period, depending on the plant's size. The new regulations also require that meat and poultry slaughter plants conduct microbial tests for *E.coli* (a general indicator of sanitary conditions) but do not require meat and poultry processing plants to conduct similar testing. Requiring HACCP and microbial testing is without question important in moving towards a more scientific approach, but it does not address the fundamental problem of multiple jurisdictions nor the inefficiencies caused by mandating the frequency of inspections for some products and requiring little or no inspection or testing of other products.

While no system will be foolproof, a targeted, risk-based approach would allow for the more effective use of resources and ensure a safer food supply.

If you or your staff have any questions or if you would like a briefing on our food safety work, please call me at (202) 512-5138. Major contributors to this report are Keith W. Oleson and John M. Nicholson, Jr.



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Agriculture Issues

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LIST OF GAO'S KEY FOOD SAFETY REPORTS

Food Safety: Information on Foodborne Illnesses (GAO/RCED-96-96, May 8, 1996)

Food Safety and Quality: Who Does What in the Federal Government
(GAO/RCED-91-19A, Dec. 21, 1990).

Food Safety and Quality: Who Does What in the Federal Government
(GAO/RCED-91-19B, Dec. 21, 1990).

Food Safety and Quality: Uniform, Risk-based Inspection System Needed to Ensure Safe Food Supply (GAO/RCED-92-152, June 26, 1992).

Food Safety: Risk-Based Inspections and Microbial Monitoring Needed for Meat and Poultry (GAO/RCED-94-110, May 19, 1994).

Food Safety: Changes Needed to Minimize Unsafe Chemicals in Food (GAO/RCED-94-192, Sep. 26, 1994).

Food Safety: A Unified, Risk-Based Food Safety System Needed (GAO/T-RCED-94-223, May 25, 1994).

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