

FOOD SAFETY AND INSPECTION SERVICE

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies

Madame Chairwoman, Ranking Member Kingston, and members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) fiscal year (FY) 2009 budget request for the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), and to discuss the various initiatives that FSIS is undertaking to meet the latest challenges in food safety and food defense.

First, let me take this opportunity to thank all of you for providing FSIS with the resources necessary to ensure that meat, poultry, and processed egg products distributed in commerce for use as human food are safe, secure, wholesome, and accurately labeled. This is part of our mutual charge: protecting the American public and those who consume American products. Everyone here today shares the same goal of promoting and ensuring public health. I look forward to discussing the ways in which FSIS is working to achieve this important mission.

FSIS is the public health regulatory agency in USDA charged with administering and enforcing the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, the Egg Products Inspection Act, portions of the Agricultural Marketing Act, the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, and the regulations that implement these laws. The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act requires that all livestock be handled and slaughtered in a humane manner.

At FSIS, our policies are rooted in science and based on data. Through science-based initiatives and efforts to continue to strengthen our infrastructure, FSIS has made progress in reducing the incidence of foodborne illness and in deterring adulterated food from reaching the consumer.

FSIS' workforce is the frontline of public health. In FY 2007, the Agency employed over 9,000 personnel, including about 7,800 full-time in-plant and other front-line inspection personnel protecting the public health in approximately 6,200 Federally-inspected establishments nationwide. In addition, FSIS has 134 program investigators and other in-commerce personnel to provide surveillance and investigation of product from the time that it leaves the plant until it reaches the consumer. The high volume and the high-risk nature of the products FSIS inspects demands an in-plant inspection presence, which is not only required by law, but is necessary to protect consumers.

During FY 2007, FSIS inspection program personnel performed antemortem and postmortem inspection procedures to ensure public health requirements were met in the

processing of over 48 billion pounds of livestock carcasses, almost 57 billion pounds of poultry carcasses, and about 4.3 billion pounds of processed egg products. They also inspected at U.S. borders 3.9 billion pounds of imported meat and poultry products. In addition, FSIS personnel conducted more than nine million procedures to verify that establishments met food safety and wholesomeness requirements.

FSIS also has a small expert cadre of program investigators nationwide who conduct food safety, food defense, and outbreak investigations across all in commerce meat, poultry and egg product facilities. These individuals are responsible for all FSIS enforcement actions, working closely with our Office of the Inspector General (OIG), State, local and other government agencies to ensure swift and effective action. The work of these personnel as well as our laboratory technicians, import inspectors and others is paramount to the success of our mission and the protection of consumers.

I am proud to report that in recognition of FSIS' success in managing personnel, on December 3, 2007, FSIS received the 2007 Presidential Quality Award for Management Excellence. FSIS was honored for its dedication, hard work and outstanding leadership in advancing the President's Management Agenda through the strategic management of human capital. More specifically, the award recognizes the agency's many initiatives in human capital productivity, including the ability to recruit and hire the veterinarians, food inspectors, scientists and other employees that are the backbone of the FSIS public health and inspection program. FSIS received one of only six awards given to Federal agencies

for excellence in quality and productivity. This was the first time an agency within the USDA received such an award.

Current Concerns Regarding Humane Handling of Livestock

Before I go any further, I would like to address the ongoing investigation of the Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company (Hallmark/Westland) in Chino, California. I want to assure you that I am deeply concerned about the inhumane handling of non-ambulatory disabled cattle in that facility.

I want to further assure you that, as soon as we learned of the problems at Hallmark/Westland, we took immediate steps to determine if the allegations made public by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) were accurate. Secretary Edward Schafer called on USDA's OIG to work with FSIS and USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to conduct a thorough investigation into this matter.

In addition, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service placed an administrative hold on all Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company products that were in or destined for Federal food and nutrition programs, pending further information from the investigation. An administrative hold prevents program operators from using the product until further notification from USDA.

As soon as FSIS determined that humane handling regulations were violated, FSIS issued a Notice of Suspension to Hallmark/Westland, although the establishment voluntarily

stopped slaughter operations as soon as the investigation began. Additionally, immediately upon receiving conclusive evidence that non-ambulatory animals were allowed into the food supply, FSIS worked with the company to initiate a voluntary recall.

Timeline of USDA Actions

On January 30, 2008, USDA learned about the original HSUS video regarding violations through the media. On the same day, USDA indefinitely suspended Hallmark/Westland as a supplier to Federal nutrition programs. Hallmark/Westland was not permitted to produce or deliver any products under contract, and, under the suspension, no further contracts could be awarded to the company. In addition, USDA placed an administrative hold on all Hallmark/Westland products we identified that were in, or destined for, Federal nutrition programs as of October 1, 2006. The October 1, 2006, date for the start of the initial hold period was chosen to capture the Hallmark/Westland product that was in the Federal nutrition program supply chain.

On February 1, 2008, Hallmark/Westland voluntarily stopped slaughter operations. As a result of FSIS findings, FSIS suspended inspection at the plant on February 4, 2008. This action was based on FSIS findings that the establishment failed to prevent the inhumane handling of animals intended for slaughter at the facility, as required by FSIS regulations and the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act.

Our evidence demonstrates that, over the past two years, this plant did not always notify the FSIS public health veterinarian when cattle became non-ambulatory after passing ante-mortem (prior to slaughter) inspection, as is required by FSIS regulations. It is important to note that certain cattle, while ambulatory when they pass ante-mortem inspection, later become non-ambulatory from an acute injury or another circumstance. If such a situation occurs, FSIS regulations require the public health veterinarian to inspect the animal again before the animal is permitted to go to slaughter. This failure by Hallmark/Westland led to the company's February 17, 2008, voluntary recall of 143 million pounds of fresh and frozen beef products produced at the establishment since February 1, 2006.

On February 17, 2008, FSIS amended the suspension to reflect the fact that Hallmark/Westland had allowed cattle that had become non-ambulatory after passing ante-mortem inspection to be slaughtered without further inspection by FSIS personnel. This suspension will remain in effect and the establishment will be unable to operate until corrective actions are submitted in writing and verified through a full review by FSIS. Slaughter operations will not resume at Hallmark/Westland until the company complies fully with FSIS regulations.

While it is extremely unlikely that these animals pose a risk to human health, the recall action was deemed necessary because the establishment did not comply with FSIS regulations. The recall was designated Class II because of the remote probability that the recalled beef products would cause adverse health effects, if consumed.

As is the case for all recalls, FSIS is conducting effectiveness checks to verify that customers have received notice of the Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company recall and are making every effort to retrieve and destroy the recalled product or return it to the establishment. FSIS personnel are in the process of verifying that Hallmark/Westland has been diligent and successful in notifying its consignees of the need to retrieve and control recalled product, and that the consignees have responded appropriately.

Safeguarding Against BSE

I am aware that this situation has raised questions about the risk of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). I would like to take this opportunity to give you a brief summary of the safeguards against BSE that we have in place to protect our food supply.

Since the discovery of the first case of BSE in Great Britain in 1986, we have learned a tremendous amount about this disease. That knowledge has greatly informed USDA's regulatory systems and response efforts. It has also given us the opportunity to examine our own cattle herd, which is why we know that the risk of BSE in the United States is extremely low.

As noted earlier, non-ambulatory cattle are excluded from the food supply as part of the Federal government's interlocking system of controls to protect the food supply from BSE. These BSE security measures include the ban on non-ambulatory cattle, but that is simply one of the multiple measures in place.

We have learned that the single most important thing we can do to protect human health regarding BSE is the removal from the food supply of specified risk materials (SRMs)—those tissues that, according to the available scientific evidence, could be infective in a cow with BSE. FSIS requires that all SRMs, including the brain and spinal cord, are removed from carcasses so that they do not enter the food supply. Slaughter facilities cannot operate without the continuous presence of FSIS inspection personnel to ensure safe and wholesome product, and the safeguards include the removal and segregation of SRMs. FSIS line inspectors are stationed at key points along the production line where they are able to directly observe certain SRM removal activities. Other off-line inspection personnel verify additional plant SRM removal, segregation and disposal. According to the 2005 Harvard Risk Assessment, SRM removal alone reduces the risk to consumers of BSE by ninety-nine percent.

The ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban is another significant step that the Federal government has taken to prevent the spread of BSE and bring about its eradication in the animal population. In 1997, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) implemented a mandatory feed ban that prohibits feeding ruminant protein to other ruminants. The feed ban is a vital measure to prevent the transmission of BSE to cattle.

Moreover, BSE testing is best used as a surveillance tool. By testing animals that show possible clinical signs of the disease, we can document the effectiveness of our security measures.

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service has conducted targeted BSE surveillance testing since 1990, including an enhanced surveillance effort that was initiated after an imported cow tested positive for the disease in December 2003. The goal of the enhanced effort, which began in June 2004, was to test as many animals in the targeted population as possible over a 24-month period. This intensive effort detected only two animals with the disease, out of over 759,000 animals tested. Both of those animals were born prior to initiation of the FDA feed ban and neither entered the food supply. This testing confirms an extremely low prevalence of the disease in the United States.

Because of the strong systems the United States has put in place, we can be confident of the safety of our beef supply and that the spread of BSE has been prevented in this nation.

Further Actions

The investigation led by OIG with support from FSIS and USDA's AMS is ongoing. Once the investigation has concluded, we will have additional information to determine the actions for FSIS oversight, inspection and enforcement that may be required. However, we are not waiting for the completion of the investigation to act. USDA is already taking a number of steps to strengthen our inspection system.

USDA will continue to provide the public with an update of our actions at www.usda.gov/actions.

Public Health Data Infrastructure

Data is fundamental for FSIS. All of our decisions hinge on the availability of data and the science from which it derives. Both internal FSIS assessments of its informational technology needs and audits by the USDA's OIG have identified several areas within the FSIS public health data infrastructure that require strengthening. As a result of these findings, FSIS has been actively strengthening the way that it collects and analyzes data and bolstering its infrastructure.

For example, we made available much of the agency's inspection-related data through a data warehouse to provide easier and quicker access to data for analysis across agency databases and to improve decision-making. We have been using AssuranceNet, a Web-based management control system that pulls inspection data from the data warehouse, since FY 2006 for inspection operations in the field and are committed to expanding this system to all agency programs in the future.

FSIS' goal is to provide broadband connectivity in the field so that most inspection personnel are linked to a near real time communications infrastructure. We currently have enabled over 2,300 connections as of February 1, 2008, so that inspection personnel are linked to a near real-time data communications infrastructure. This improved access is vital for the agency personnel who are collecting the data out in the field and will allow them to spend more of their time on inspection activities.

To build on our past efforts, this past year we formed the Data Analysis and Integration Group (DAIG) and the Data Coordinating Committee (DCC). The DAIG is a staff dedicated to conducting data analysis and ensuring that agency data analyses are consistent, of high quality, and relevant to the agency's mission and business processes. The DCC has members from each agency program office and serves as a coordinating body to ensure that there is no duplication of analytical effort and to keep all parts of the agency abreast of the data analytical work that is being done. We are also creating analysis plans for directives and notices, conducting peer reviews and soliciting input from stakeholders, and developing a consistent set of tools for conducting data analysis.

Moving forward, FSIS is working to enhance its system for inspection to make it more public health based and risk based. The goal of this system is to focus our resources where they can better ensure that food safety systems are under control. This system will be science-based and data-driven; focusing our inspection resources where they can best accomplish our most important charge: protecting the public.

This enhanced inspection system will rely on a Web-based Public Health Information System, which is currently in development. This system will make the collection of data and reporting easier and quicker for inspectors in the field. It will allow the agency to analyze data more quickly and to identify trends sooner. This is vital for our public health mission because it will decrease the time needed to respond to incidents and improve FSIS' ability to collect, analyze, and predict likely outcomes, which will in turn allow agency employees to better protect public health.

As part of the enhanced system, the agency is also developing a poultry slaughter inspection system that is public-health based. This effort will focus on establishments that slaughter young chickens, or broilers. Our goal in both of these initiatives is to better protect public health and diminish the incidence of foodborne illness.

As a public health agency, FSIS needs systems that can provide information in a way that allows data sharing, data mining, data reporting, and data analysis throughout the agency, with Federal partners, and, in appropriate circumstances, the public. These new initiatives will give us better tools to lower the chance that our consumers will contract a foodborne illness by reducing the prevalence of dangerous pathogens in the meat and poultry supply.

We are committed to working with all of our food safety and public health partners to use the data that is available and seek more data to be able to attribute illnesses to specific foods. To cite one important example, we held a public meeting in April 2007 with our stakeholders and partners and engaged them in a discussion about the importance of foodborne illness attribution data, how this data is being developed, and how it is being used. Because we believe attribution is important in public health decision making, we are pioneering the use of attribution data in our evolving public health risk-based approach to inspection.

Food Safety Assessments

In response to recommendations in the 2003 and 2004 OIG audits, FSIS implemented a more comprehensive system to verify establishments' Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) plans using food safety assessments. During these food safety assessments, specially trained personnel conduct in-depth reviews of the designs of establishments' HACCP or food safety plans. OIG agrees with FSIS that food safety assessments are a fundamental building block for assessing establishment risk. Food safety assessments are also a key component in building FSIS' public health data infrastructure.

One significant recommendation from the more recent December 2007 OIG audit directed FSIS to complete food safety assessments in all plants using an objective scoring mechanism to help determine the level of inspection needed. Our effort to do this for all plants is well underway.

Addressing Gaps in Our Current Infrastructure and System

FSIS performs a key role in addressing the complex public health and food defense issues associated with the handling of meat, poultry, and processed egg products in-commerce. Responsibilities include surveillance of the transportation, storage, and distribution of inspected products for intentional and some non-intentional chemical, biological, and physical abuse of inspected products; conducting investigations to detect, prosecute, and deter criminal violations; and performing food defense activities including assessment and emergency response. These in-commerce activities include surveillance review

activities which investigators conducted at approximately 11,841 in-commerce locations. These activities focused on verifying that meat, poultry, and processed egg products that were transported, distributed, and stored in-commerce were safe, secure, and accurately labeled.

As we have been working to ensure we have necessary data, we have also been identifying and addressing gaps in our current infrastructure and system. One area where we have focused attention and resources has been our in-commerce surveillance activities. Last year we issued a series of directives for employees outlining the standard investigative and surveillance practices and procedures to be followed. Later this spring, we will be automating data from all our food safety and food defense surveillance activities in commerce, including retail, wholesale, transportation and distribution.

Pathogen Reduction Initiatives and Successes

FSIS is dedicated to public health, a dynamic, ever-changing field. There is always more that can – and will – be done to fight foodborne pathogens. However, FSIS’ scientific policies have made a measurable, positive impact on public health.

Over the past year we focused most of our efforts on *E. coli* O157:H7 and *Salmonella*.

I will first address *E. coli* O157:H7. The month of June 2007 brought an increase in the number of *E. coli* O157:H7-positive samples collected by FSIS, and this fall brought an increased number of recalls and illnesses. As a result, FSIS implemented several risk

management initiatives, including increasing the number of raw ground beef samples that were taken and implementing trim testing ahead of schedule.

As part of our continuing fight against *E. coli* O157:H7, FSIS has begun testing all materials that are used as components in raw ground beef, whether the raw ground beef is domestic or imported; conducting food safety assessments at establishments that have positive test results for *E. coli* O157:H7, performing targeted sampling for *E. coli* O157:H7 at slaughter and grinding facilities; using a more sensitive enrichment broth for *E. coli* O157:H7 sampling; and meeting with stakeholders and experts to determine what additional steps can be taken to combat *E. coli* O157:H7.

One significant step we took was creating a checklist to better assess how establishments are controlling the risk of *E. coli* O157:H7. FSIS inspection personnel have completed these checklists in nearly 2,500 beef establishments, both suppliers and grinders, to evaluate control measures.

The agency is completing a more in-depth analysis of the data captured in responses to questions, filled out by FSIS inspection program personnel, about reassessment of HACCP plans related to *E. coli* O157:H7. Our preliminary data, completed in November 2007, shows that almost 96 percent of all beef slaughter and processing establishments reassessed their HACCP plans. We are analyzing these responses, and we anticipate that the analysis will lead to new policies, directives, or possibly rules and regulations.

FSIS has also been aggressively combating *Salmonella*. Each year an estimated 1.4 million people in the United States develop foodborne illness from *Salmonella*. In February 2006, FSIS announced an initiative to reduce the presence of *Salmonella* in raw meat and poultry products. The initiative concentrated resources at establishments with higher levels of *Salmonella* and changed the reporting and utilization of FSIS *Salmonella* verification test results.

Earlier this year, FSIS announced further changes in its *Salmonella* policy to continue driving down the incidence of *Salmonella* in raw meat and poultry products. On March 28, 2008, the agency will begin posting on its Web site completed verification test results from establishments performing in Category 2 or 3, beginning with young chicken slaughter establishments. The agency will also offer specific waivers to Category 1 establishments, or those with sampling results at or less than half of the current standards. With these waivers, those establishments with the lowest *Salmonella* rates will be able to test new procedures, equipment, or processing techniques that will facilitate improvements in the ongoing control of *Salmonella*.

The agency will conduct targeted sampling based on available data regardless of the relative risk posed by a given product, randomly scheduling sample sets at Category 1 establishments.

Our Federal partners also play important roles in our efforts to better control *Salmonella*. In August 2007, FSIS and Agricultural Research Service (ARS) finalized a cooperative

agreement to strengthen their data-sharing relationship. The agreement ensures that identifying information on *Salmonella* isolates Pulsed-Field Gel Electrophoresis patterns that FSIS collects are compared against information about isolates associated with human illness in PulseNet, a database maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) . Under the agreement, FSIS will be able to routinely access this data for all isolates maintained by ARS, instead of sending a request for isolates of special interest. The data would also be available in a timeframe rapid enough for data to be relevant to in-plant and public health investigations. These changes are expected to play a significant role in providing valuable attribution data by identifying whether products regulated by FSIS contributed to reported human illnesses.

We can easily see the positive results of this risk-based strategy. If we compare the plant categories based on broiler carcasses analyzed for *Salmonella* in 2006 to 2007, we see that the percentage of plants in Category 1, or those with sampling results amounting to half or less than half of the current standards, increased dramatically, from 49 percent to 74 percent. Likewise, the percentage of plants in Category 3 decreased significantly from 10 percent to two percent. Essentially, the percentage of young broiler carcasses that tested positive for *Salmonella* decreased by 50 percent – from 16 percent to 8 percent.

Significant concerns have been raised by stakeholders about the lack of information on how much FSIS-regulated products have contributed to human illness caused by *Salmonella* and other pathogens. FSIS has taken a number of initial steps to be able to better provide such information and intends to take more steps in the near future. This

includes the revised steps the agency is taking to collect and evaluate *Salmonella*-related data associated with FSIS regulated raw products to better ensure public health. FSIS is developing a pilot program around the best proactive use of this comparison data with CDC PulseNet data and is exploring broad options to help ensure public health in conjunction with our public health partners.

Over the next few years, FSIS will conduct a series of recurring, nationwide baseline studies. These baseline studies are designed to provide FSIS and the regulated industry with data concerning the prevalence of selected foodborne pathogens and microorganisms that serve as indicators of process control. This data will enable the agency and industry to target interventions that effectively reduce the presence of foodborne pathogens found in FSIS-regulated products. In addition, these baseline studies will provide essential data for future risk assessments and permit the evaluation of trends over time.

FSIS began a nationwide baseline study on June 25, 2007, designed to estimate the prevalence and quantitative level of *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* on broiler carcasses. Ultimately, the microbiological data obtained from this baseline study will be used in the development of risk assessments, risk-based sampling programs, performance standards and regulatory policy decisions. We will complete testing for the baseline by the end of August 2008.

FSIS has also instituted more targeted sampling for *Listeria monocytogenes (Lm)*. This program, in its fourth year, is based on the *Listeria* risk assessment and the *Listeria* regulation. Food safety assessments are conducted for targeted plants and in addition to product samples, samples are taken of the environment in the plant as well as food contact surfaces. We are also in the initial stages of looking at the virulence of the *Lm* serotypes we find through our testing program. Because the percentage of regulatory samples of meat the poultry products that tested positive for *Lm* has fallen by almost 80 percent since 1998, we are now looking at what measure we should be using to report *Lm* performance. We are committed to continuing to demonstrate improvement and are considering tightening or lowering the *Lm* performance measure.

Ensuring the Safety of Imported Food

Another important role for FSIS is ensuring the safety of imported meat, poultry and processed egg products. First we establish the initial equivalence of the meat, poultry, or processed egg inspection system of a country wishing to export to the United States. We then verify continuing equivalence of the foreign system through audits and re-inspection of foreign meat, poultry, or processed egg products imported into the United States; 34 countries have achieved equivalence. However, only 29 of these 34 eligible countries are currently sending products to the United States.

FSIS engages in three types of foreign inspection systems equivalence evaluations: initial equivalence determinations, individual sanitary measure determinations, and ongoing verification activities. Equivalence is the foundation for our system of imports. It

recognizes that an exporting country can employ different sanitary measures to address food safety hazards if the country can objectively demonstrate that their measures provide the same level of public health protection as the measures used by the importing country.

As part of the ongoing equivalence process, FSIS must determine whether foreign countries' inspection systems are maintaining equivalence and in cases where these countries fail to meet U.S. requirements, initiate additional actions. FSIS conducts on-site audits to determine whether a country is maintaining an equivalent inspection system or whether further measures are warranted to protect U.S. public health.

FSIS performs re-inspection of all shipments of meat, poultry, and egg products, with few exceptions, exported to the United States from eligible foreign countries. The shipments are reviewed and verified for compliance with FSIS regulatory requirements including product eligibility, certification by the foreign inspection system, condition of product and labeling verification. Re-inspection of product is then subject to statistically-based random sampling and intended to verify the effectiveness of the foreign inspection system.

FSIS also performs random re-inspection on approximately 10 percent of shipments of meat, poultry, and egg products. These re-inspection tasks include product examinations, microbiological analysis for pathogens, or a test for chemical residues. Approximately 5 percent of shipments of imported meat and poultry products receive microbiological and

chemical testing. Acceptable products are marked as “inspected and passed” and released into commerce. Non-compliant products are rejected, marked as “Refused Entry,” and either destroyed or returned to the originating country. More intensive re-inspection is automatically applied to future shipments of product from the foreign establishment when product fails re-inspection.

Once the imported product enters the country, FSIS’ field force of program investigators provide ongoing surveillance of product in commerce to protect the public from illegally imported and smuggled meat, poultry and egg products from reaching their tables.

Ensuring the Safety of State-Inspected Product

FSIS also conducts comprehensive reviews of all State meat and poultry programs to ensure “at least equal to” programs are operating and can be maintained. We follow a review manual that follows a two-part methodology for State reviews; annual self-assessments by the state and FSIS on-site reviews. On August 13, 2007, all State-inspected establishments and custom exempt operations within the New Mexico meat and poultry inspection program officially transferred to Federal inspection and jurisdiction.

Training

Training has been and continues to be a top priority for FSIS. It is the foundation of our public health successes and a key element in our strategy to reduce the incidence of foodborne illness.

FSIS can only achieve its public health, food safety, and food defense missions with a well-prepared workforce. Through scientific and technical training that reflects the agency's science-based approach to food safety and food defense, we can accomplish this. FSIS has made a number of improvements in employee training, thereby increasing workforce capability and advancing our public health goals.

FSIS has made substantial progress in improving its workforce training program. Some key milestones demonstrating improvement include establishing a new curriculum based on food safety and public health; implementing training as a condition of employment; launching a comprehensive management, leadership and development program based on the Office of Personnel Management's competencies to meet the goals of the President's Management Agenda and the need for succession planning; introducing a regular process to provide training that coincides with the issuance of key agency policies; building capacity for follow up training and education through distance learning; achieving greater flexibility with training contracts; establishing regional training bringing courses closer the worksite; and evaluating the effectiveness of training through pre and post testing.

While we have made improvements, I believe more must be done. An increased focus on science-based policies requires more training and continual updates as policies change. The lessons learned from recalls this past year raised questions about the support field employees were getting to implement the knowledge they gained in training when they returned to duty.

We intend to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the FSIS training program and to identify how FSIS can continue to enhance and improve its training programs.

Food Defense and Emergency Response

FSIS has a strong infrastructure in place to protect the food supply from intentional and unintentional threats and to coordinate all agency activities to prevent, respond to, and recover from any attack on the food supply and handle large-scale food emergencies.

Growth in the agency's food safety and food defense responsibilities is reflected not merely in the volume of product inspected and shipped, but also dramatically in the need to cover complex public health issues associated with the handling of meat, poultry, and egg products outside of the federally inspected establishments.

These responsibilities include surveillance of the transportation, storage, and distribution of domestic and imported products for intentional and non-intentional chemical, biological, and physical contamination of products; conducting investigations to detect and control non-compliant products, developing evidence to prosecute and thereby, deter criminal violations; performing food defense activities such as assessment, developing partnerships with other Federal, State and local health, agriculture, and law enforcement officials and emergency response; supporting and following-up on recalls; conducting illness outbreak and consumer complaint investigations; and auditing and reviewing of State and foreign inspection programs. These efforts resulted in detaining almost 16

million pounds of adulterated or mislabeled domestic or illegally imported meat, poultry, or egg products; and approximately 400 regulatory enforcement actions against owners of meat, poultry, and egg product facilities.

Today, FSIS conducts food defense activities both in-plant and in commerce to ensure the safety of domestic, imported and exported product. A field force of approximately 100 investigators conduct food safety and food defense surveillance at food warehouses, distribution centers, retail stores and other types of facilities throughout the United States to determine whether meat, poultry or egg products distributed in commerce are safe, secure, wholesome and not adulterated or misbranded.

The agency has developed specific procedures on monitoring and sampling to be taken depending on the threat level as determined by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Over 1.4 million food defense verification procedures were conducted in FY 2007. The testing is based on vulnerability or risk-based assessments for selected domestic and imported food products, which allows the agency to rank food products and potential contaminating agents in order of highest concern.

FSIS has created and distributed model food security plans that FSIS-inspected meat, poultry and processed egg products facilities and import establishments can use to develop and implement a Food Defense Plan. These plans identify the types of preventive steps that establishments might take to minimize food security risks for products under their control. A simplified version of guidance on food defense plans was

developed this past year in consultation with industry trade groups, which provides an easy three-step process which will result in a completed food defense plan. The agency continues to encourage industry to develop food defense plans.

This past year the agency began final user testing of an automated Non-Routine Incident Management System that can quickly notify key agency emergency responders about emergency incidents while tracking and sharing those responses with those managing the incident.

The agency's enhanced Consumer Complaint Monitoring System, a national surveillance system that monitors food-related consumer complaints that will eventually be incorporated into the Public Health Information System, will further assist in the agency's efforts to track potential attacks on the food supply.

To further strengthen food safety and defense, FSIS is launching a new automated In-Commerce System which will work in tandem with the Public Health Inspection System to provide a farm-to-table database. The In-Commerce System will house all available data on in-commerce facilities, facilitate ongoing collection of in-commerce data, data exchange with other data bases vital to our mission, and provide risk-based reports for users to better focus resources on identified food safety and defense weaknesses in commerce.

FSIS has also taken a lead role in the development of the Food Emergency Response Network (FERN), a joint effort of national, State, and local laboratories to provide ongoing surveillance and monitoring of food and to promptly respond to a foodborne illness outbreak or intentional contamination that targets the Nation's food supply. Additionally, FSIS has cooperative agreements with a total of 21 State labs geographically located across the country. The FERN laboratories will eventually be proficient to screen for the same threat agents as Federal labs, some with capability to do confirmation testing. FSIS primarily focuses on microbiological agents with our partners at FDA focusing on chemical and radiological agents.

I mentioned that FERN is a joint effort with our sister agencies at the national, State, and local levels. Yet another example of inter-agency coordination and collaboration by FSIS is participation in the integrated consortium of lab networks developed by the Department of Homeland Security. This consortium ensures coordination among Federal and State partners focused on both food and agriculture. The consortium ensures consistency of methods development, reporting of lab results and the sharing of lab results among all Federal and State partners.

Outreach to Small and Very Small Plants

All plants, including small and very small plants, must have well-designed and effective HACCP plans. HACCP is the regulatory standard that all plants are required to comply with to protect public health, and it provides the foundation for the FSIS strategic, data-driven inspection program.

For FSIS to ensure public health protection through food safety, it not only needs to verify that small and very small plants, establishments that comprise over 90 percent of the plants under FSIS' jurisdiction, are producing safe food but to reach out to those plants to make sure that they fully understand their responsibilities and how to achieve them. Thus, for our small and very small plants, we launched a targeted Web page and launched a monthly publication called *Small Plant News* which includes articles with up-to-date technical information and guidance, resource materials, and FSIS rules and regulations as well as the most common questions asked and answers that apply to establishments' operational practices. All of this is in addition to outreach visits, net meetings, information sessions, and numerous regulatory education sessions.

As one of our outreach efforts to stakeholders, including small and very small plants, we launched askFSIS in 2007. askFSIS is a Web-based feature designed to help answer technical and policy questions regarding inspection and public health regulations 24 hours a day. The new interactive feature provides answers on technical issues in more depth than the standard list of "frequently asked questions" available through FSIS' Web site. It allows visitors to seek answers on topics such as exporting, labeling and inspection-related policies, programs and procedures, as well as submit new questions to be added to the system. This new Web-based tool has received high customer satisfaction marks from our stakeholders, and the system already has nearly 800 questions and answers.

We will soon be announcing an organizational change that will send a strong signal to agency employees and small and very small plant owners and operators indicating just how seriously we take our outreach mission.

Consumer Education

FSIS also has an obligation and responsibility to provide food safety education for consumers.

Our *Be Food Safe* Campaign is an updated public education effort based on the Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill messages developed as part of the national Fight BAC!® campaign. FSIS developed the *Be Food Safe* campaign in cooperation with the Partnership for Food Safety Education, the FDA, and CDC and Prevention because research shows that Americans are aware of food safety, but they need more information to achieve and maintain safe food handling behaviors. The *Be Food Safe* campaign, which is grounded in social marketing, behavior change, and risk communications theories, is designed to provide educators with the tools to inform consumers about foodborne illness and raise the level of awareness of the dangers associated with improper handling and undercooking of food. The campaign centers around a simple yet vital message: Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill.

be FoodSafe: The FSIS Magazine, focuses on food safety behavior trends, emerging science and research, inspection issues (domestic and international), and education programs for food workers, consumers, and caregivers. Currently, *be FoodSafe: The*

FSIS Magazine has nearly 20,000 online subscribers.

A prominent feature on FSIS' Web site is the virtual representative, "Ask Karen." "Ask Karen," the only government-sponsored virtual representative in the world. Consumers may ask questions of the automated representative, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, through an extensive database of frequently updated questions and answers, and receive responses about safely storing, preparing, and handling meat, poultry, and processed egg products.

We also staff the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, responding to an average 81,000 telephone calls annually on the safe storage, preparation, and handling of meat, poultry, and processed egg products.

Those at highest risk for foodborne illness, infants and young children, pregnant women, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems caused by cancer treatment, diabetes, AIDS, and bone marrow and organ transplants, have been the focus of the majority of our efforts. FSIS held a conference late in 2006 focused on how to reach the more vulnerable at-risk population. This year we will be taking the findings from the conference and in conjunction with our public health and medical partners, we will develop and implement strategies on how to best to reach those most at risk for foodborne illness. We also unveiled a series of brochures and fact sheets at the conference providing vital food safety information for this most vulnerable population.

We continue to improve our outreach to specialized groups. FSIS continues to translate food safety education documents into Spanish and continues its outreach to the Hispanic community by providing food safety education materials for planned activities. The Spanish language brochure, "*Todo Cuenta Cuando Se Trata de Cuidar s Su Familia*" (*Everything Counts When Looking After Your Family*) was selected for a 2007 National Association of Government Communicators' Blue Pencil Award in the category brochures/booklets. The *En Español* section of FSIS' Web site includes news releases, fact sheets, and food defense and emergency response materials that have been translated into Spanish. The agency also continues to distribute the flyer, "Listeriosis and Pregnancy: What is Your Risk? Safe Food Handling for a Healthy Pregnancy," in English and Spanish to obstetricians and gynecologists nationwide. FSIS prepares food safety materials for the visually impaired in large print and Braille cards and is currently translating food safety information into Arabic, Chinese, Hmong, Japanese, Korean, Tagalog (Filipino), Thai, and Vietnamese.

Cooperation and Collaboration with Stakeholders

FSIS promotes stakeholder understanding, input and support of the agency's public health and food defense mission through a variety of ongoing outreach efforts such as public meetings and scientific symposia conducted every year with industry, academia, scientific, our State, local and Federal partners and consumer communities on various agency priorities. FSIS also conducts separate monthly meetings with industry associations and consumer representatives. The FSIS askKaren and the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline are an on-going means of two-way communication.

Communication with Employees

FSIS employees are also a vital stakeholder group in the agency's outreach efforts. As a former District Manager, I know first-hand how important it is for headquarters staff to communicate with our employees in the field including plants, field offices, laboratories, and alternative workplaces. I am committed to seeking input from all employees across the nation. We will continue to work with our entire workforce on future initiatives that will improve the safety and defense of our country's food supply.

FY 2009 Budget Request

I appreciate having the opportunity to present some of FSIS' biggest accomplishments and priorities to you. Now, I would like to offer an overview of the FY 2009 budget request for FSIS.

In FY 2009, FSIS is requesting \$952 million, an increase of \$22 million above the FY 2008 level.

FSIS has a statutory obligation to provide inspection of meat, poultry and egg products. An increase for the FSIS inspection program is requested to maintain our high standards for the safety and wholesomeness of meat, poultry and egg products and our continued efforts to ensure effective inspection and policy implementation. This appropriation request includes funding an increase in pay and benefit costs, which make up approximately 80 percent of FSIS' budget; an increase for costs of the State Meat and Poultry Inspection Programs; and an increase to support Federal responsibilities added

due to the takeover of the New Mexico State program. The appropriation of the full amount requested is of paramount importance because of the importance of FSIS' mission: public health.

The Administration's budget submission assumes that the cost of inspection services for Federal meat, poultry, and processed egg products will continue to be paid with Federal funds. The Administration also proposes legislation to provide USDA with the authority to collect new user fees, including a licensing fee and a performance fee. The collection of these new user fees, which we estimate would amount to \$96 million during FY 2009, would be available for spending in FY 2010. A total of about \$92 million in licensing fees would be collected from establishments based on their inspection services. An additional \$4 million in performance fees would be collected from establishments that require additional inspection activities for performance failures such as retesting, recalls, or inspection activities linked to an outbreak.

Conclusion

Madam Chairwoman, thank you again for providing me with the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the steps that FSIS is taking to continue serving the public health and ensuring food defense. I look forward to working with you and the Subcommittee to continue to improve our food safety system to meet the growing challenges and opportunities of tomorrow.