CSPI CENTER FOR SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST
Publisher of *Nutrition Action Healthletter*

May 30, 2006

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food Safety and Inspection Service
Docket Clerk
300 12th Street, S.W.
Room 102 Cotton Annex
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Notice and response to comments on *Salmonella* Verification Sample Result Reporting: Agency Policy and Use in Public Health Protection (Docket No. 04-026N)

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) appreciates this opportunity to comment on the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) proposed rule on *Salmonella* Verification Sample Result Reporting: Agent Policy and Use in Public Health Protection. CSPI is a non-profit consumer advocacy and education organization that focuses largely on food safety and nutrition issues. It is supported principally by the 900,000 subscribers to its *Nutrition Action Healthletter* and by foundation grants.

Background

Foodborne illnesses are a substantial health burden in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that foodborne diseases cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths in the United States each year. In 2000, the Economic Research Service estimated the cost of just five bacterial foodborne

pathogens – *Campylobacter, Salmonella, E. coli,* and *Listeria* – in terms of lost productivity, hospitalizations, and deaths to be $6.9 billion.[1]

Salmonella infections cause an estimated 1.4 million illnesses and 400 deaths annually in the United States.[2] While the incidence of several other foodborne pathogens has decreased significantly from 1996 to 2004, the incidence of *Salmonella* infections has only seen a modest decline.[3] The overall incidence of cases in 2004 per 100,000 people was 14.7, down from 16 cases per 100,000 compared with 1996-2000. But certain strains have increased dramatically. *Salmonella Newport* has seen an alarming 41% increase while antimicrobial resistance strains are increasingly becoming a public health threat.[4]

Healthy People 2010 set a goal of 6.8 cases per 100,000 persons, less than half the 2004 rate. *Salmonella* contamination in raw meat and poultry is a significant source for this pathogen. If the Healthy People 2010 goal is going to be met, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) has to significantly improve its *Salmonella* verification sampling program.

FSIS has proposed several changes on how it uses the results from the *Salmonella* verification sampling program for meat and poultry establishments. This includes concentrating resources at establishments with higher levels of *Salmonella* and changing the reporting and utilization of FSIS *Salmonella* verification test results. While verification sampling is not

[1] USDA, Economic Research Service at http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/FoodborneDisease/features.htm.
[2] Voetsch AC, Van Gilder T J, Angulo FJ, et al. FoodNet estimate of the burden of illness caused by nontyphoidal *Salmonella* infections in the United States. Clin Infect Dis 2004; 38(Suppl 3):S127--34.
[3] CDC. Preliminary FoodNet Data on the Incidence of Infection with Pathogens Transmitted Commonly Through Food --- 10 Sites, United States, 2004.
[4] CDC. Preliminary FoodNet Data on the Incidence of Infection with Pathogens Transmitted Commonly Through Food --- 10 Sites, United States, 2004.

designed to estimate national prevalence of *Salmonella*, CSPI supports FSIS's efforts to enhance public health protection by focusing on controlling the pathogen in the plant.

CSPI strongly supports FSIS's proposal to categorize plants by their demonstrated level of process control, thus allowing the agency to focus resources on potentially higher-risk products. We disagree, however, that the best performing plants should be sampled at a rate of once every two years. Annual sampling should be performed in every plant.

FSIS should also consider reducing line speeds in plants that do not meet the *Salmonella* standard. As line speeds increase it becomes more difficult for workers to do their jobs properly. Faster speeds can also mean sloppy processing, which when not caught by USDA inspectors can exacerbate contamination from pathogens like *Salmonella*. Reducing the line speed in plants that do not meet the standard is an incentive-based approach to improving process control. Plants should not be able to maintain high-speed production at the expense of food safety.

In addition, CSPI supports these important changes proposed or being considered by FSIS:

- Testing young turkeys for *Salmonella* and the adoption of new performance standards for young turkey and geese carcasses.
- Adoption of new Categories 1, 2 and 3 to distinguish levels of process control in the industry and the targeting of *Salmonella* testing to those plants demonstrating less process control.
- Providing individual *Salmonella* test results in real time to establishments that have requested them.
- Posting quarterly nationwide data for *Salmonella* by product class on the FSIS website.
- Providing new compliance guidelines for the poultry industry containing information to control *Salmonella*.
- Monitoring percent positive in verification samples month-by-month for a year.
- Posting *Salmonella* testing sample set results on the Agency website, together with plant identifying information.

CSPI had long advocated *Salmonella* testing and application of the pathogen reduction framework to the turkey industry

Since 1999, CSPI has been urging USDA to subject the turkey industry to the same pathogen reduction testing requirements that are applied to chicken, beef and pork. It always seemed unfair that turkey was exempt from the basic *Salmonella* testing program that is a corner stone of the governments' highly praised pathogen reduction program.

Thus, we strongly support the approach advocated by FSIS to adopt new performance standards for young turkey carcasses and geese carcasses. However, the rates of allowable *Salmonella* seem excessively high (19.6% for turkey and 13.7% for goose), so we support the application of the categorization scheme (1, 2, or 3) to this segment of the industry to encourage performance at or below 50% of the performance standard.

Individual *Salmonella* test results can provide an on-going measure of process control.

Currently establishments receive results after the sample set is completed. Providing establishments with *Salmonella* performance standard testing on a sample-by-sample basis will allow them to use the data to determine the effectiveness of their standard process control measures. It will also allow those establishments that need to take corrective action to adjust and fine tune their standard process control measures as the information becomes available. This will help companies to make real-time processing improvements, thus increasing the safety of products going to consumers.

Nationwide aggregate results of *Salmonella* sample results will benefit the industry and consumers.

According to the proposed rule, FSIS will start posting the nationwide aggregate results of all samples on its website on a quarterly basis. This information will be useful to both industry and consumers. This information will give consumers more accurate and timely data on the industry's performance. It will also provide both consumers and industry information on *Salmonella* trends while also providing better transparency.

Increased attention to verification testing by FSIS will ultimately lead to improved plant performance when it comes to controlling *Salmonella*. The publication of a new compliance guideline relevant to the control of *Salmonella* will be helpful in addressing this issue in the poultry industry. Furthermore, monitoring the percent positive in verification samples by product class over the course of a year is important to determine how many establishments in a specific product class are not at the performance standard baseline guidance level.

Posting "A" results for all plants on the Agency website, with plant name and number.

We strongly support FSIS's additional proposal to post the "A" set results from the completed *Salmonella* sets for each establishment producing the product, identified by establishment name and number. This information would give all consumers and smaller retailers (not just the fast food giants) more timely information on plant performance, so when they are making a meat purchase, they could chose products from the safest plants.

In 2002, CSPI was able to obtain through FOIA information on the performance of a large number of turkey plants, and we were able to share with consumers the relative performance of these plants. See http://www.cspinet.org/new/200211211.html, especially the *Field Guide to Safer Turkeys*. The results disclosed that a quarter of the plants had very high

levels of process control (2% positive or less), and half had results that would have met USDA Category 1 criteria. The other half would have fallen into Category 2 or 3 and the really poor performers were as high as 30-50% positive for *Salmonella*.

While we support giving plants their test results in real-time, consumers and retailers should be accorded a similar benefit of having access to full set results when those results first become available. This is when they are really the most meaningful. This type of customer disclosure provides the strongest incentives for individual plants to improve performance.

Conclusion

CSPI supports the changes proposed by FSIS, especially the new categories for meat and poultry plants based on their demonstrated process control, and the addition of pathogen reduction testing for turkey and goose slaughter plants. Greater transparency through the prompt disclosure of *Salmonella* test data will also benefit consumers, retailers, and the industry. Finally, we urge USDA to post *Salmonella* "A" set results on their website together with identifying plant information and to reduce line speeds in plants that do not demonstrate pathogen reduction. Both these approaches would increase the incentives on the industry to adopt and maintain effective process controls.

Respectfully submitted,

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