

October 3, 2005

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

05-019N
05-019N-1
Amy E. McDonnell

RE: Notice of Request for a New Information Collection (Voluntary Recalls of Meat and Poultry Products)
Docket No. 05-019N

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) appreciates this opportunity to comment on the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Notice of Request for a New Information Collection (Voluntary Recalls of Meat and Poultry Products). 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.

Summary

While CSPI supports the changes that USDA/FSIS is suggesting regarding revising its Report of Recall Effectiveness form to provide a space to include an explanation of why the amount of product received by a retail consignee cannot be determined, USDA has a lot more to do to address the enormous public health threat posed by unsafe meat and poultry products that are released to the marketplace. The current "voluntary" recall system is inadequate for its intended purpose and exposes

consumers to unacceptable risks associated with tainted food products. Only about half of all recalled meat and poultry products are recovered. This means that a significant amount of tainted meat and poultry are making their way to consumers' tables.

USDA Needs Mandatory Recall Authority

Currently, the federal government has no authority to force companies to take contaminated food off the market after a food-poisoning outbreak. The process can only be initiated by the manufacturer or distributor recalling the contaminated food. While the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) branch of the USDA can request that recall be initiated, they cannot force a manufacturer or distributor to take such action. With only about one half of all recalled meat and poultry actually recovered, voluntary recalls clearly are not sufficient to protect consumers.

Also, because the current recall process is voluntary, economic interests often trump the public health of consumers. Since the recall decision is left to the manufacturers and distributors, too many recalls are initiated only after people become ill. This is a strong indication that Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems, that should prevent food hazards from entering the food supply, are failing or being ignored. If the USDA were to initiate earlier testing verification programs to ensure that food companies are focused on finding and fixing contaminated products, there would be less chance that contaminated product would make its way to consumers requiring recall after it makes people ill.

As recalls often grossly underestimate the amount of product that is contaminated, this leaves consumers without critical information to know if they have purchased or consumed the contaminated product. When the manufacturer or distributor issues a

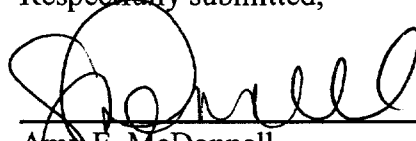
voluntary recall, they usually try to minimize the effects by issuing statements that downplay the amount of product that is contaminated. However, once USDA enters the plant and conducts an investigation, the size of the recall often increases significantly.

If the USDA had mandatory recall authority, they could issue the recall faster and give a more accurate statement about the size and scope of the recall. Doing so would reduce the number of days that contaminated products stay on the market posing serious health risks. Furthermore, consumers are often confused or completely uninformed of the recall. Because the USDA refuses to share critical information regarding the recalls, consumers are often left uninformed and wondering if the products in their refrigerators and freezers are contaminated. USDA needs to have a mandatory recall system that also allows for the release of the critical information consumers need to identify recalled products they have already purchased.

Conclusion

Every day that a recall is delayed, more consumers are at risk for food poisoning. While the current proposed change, amending the reporting form to allow an explanation of why the amount of product received cannot be determined, is an important step much more needs to be done. Consumers rely on the USDA to ensure that the food they purchase and consume is safe for them and their families. By allowing the recall process to be voluntary, USDA is doing a disservice to consumers and putting peoples' health at stake. USDA needs to improve on this system by doing away with the current passive reporting system and instituting a mandatory recall system. Furthermore, consumers need full access to the critical information so that they can identify which products may be potentially hazardous.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. McDonnell", written over a horizontal line.

Amy E. McDonnell
Staff Attorney, Food Safety Program

Caroline Smith DeWaal
Director, Food Safety Program