

EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE

Congressman George Miller, Chairman

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Chairman Miller Statement at Committee Hearing On “Challenges and Opportunities for Improving School Nutrition”

WASHINGTON, D.C. – *Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, for a committee hearing on “Challenges and Opportunities for Improving School Nutrition.”*

Good afternoon. Welcome to today’s hearing on “Challenges and Opportunities for Improving School Nutrition.” Today’s hearing will examine ways to improve school nutrition and safety in the school food supply.

Federal nutrition programs are intended to provide children with healthful food to eat at school.

During the last reauthorization of the Child Nutrition and National School Lunch Acts, we required meals to be in line with the Department of Health and Human Services’ Dietary Guidelines.

We looked to sound nutritional science that suggested the incorporation of healthy grains into the school meal program and we expanded the availability of fruits and vegetables.

We also asked schools and communities to establish local wellness policies, looking at the role of nutrition standards and physical activity in creating a healthy learning environment for our students.

It is becoming more clear, however, that the a declining federal investment in school nutrition programs has made it harder and harder for schools to provide healthy and nutritious meals that children want to eat.

We welcome the recommendations of the School Nutrition Association, whose members have been leaders in these areas.

We are going to hear more today about how the programs are working, and what we can do in next year’s reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act and the National School Lunch Act to make them work even better.

We know that when children don’t have enough nutritious food to eat, it can have serious negative effects not just on their health but on many aspects of their lives, including their ability to learn. We can’t expect children to go to school on an empty stomach and still be able to succeed academically.

Today, we are also going to examine whether appropriate controls are in place to ensure the safety of the school food supply.

As is now well known, earlier this year the Humane Society of the United States announced that it had conducted an investigation of the Westland/Hallmark Meat Company in Chino, California.

The investigation revealed that workers were using electric shocks, forklifts, and water sprays to force nonambulatory cows to stand so that they would pass inspection with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Under the law, nonambulatory cows, often called ‘downer cows,’ are not permitted to enter the food supply because of the greater risk they pose of salmonella and e. coli contamination and of carrying mad cow disease.

At the time that the Humane Society conducted this important investigation at the Westland/Hallmark slaughterhouse, federal food safety inspectors were performing inspections at the slaughterhouse twice a day.

These abuses were happening right under the inspectors’ noses, but it took a private charity organization to uncover them.

It is unacceptable that the USDA so completely failed to do its job.

We cannot judge the USDA’s inspection process as successful or effective if it allows tainted meat to enter the school food supply.

The Humane Society’s investigation prompted the largest meat recall by the USDA in the nation’s history. In total, the USDA recalled over 140 million pounds of beef. More than one-third of that total was beef that was purchased for and distributed to schools by the USDA through the National School Lunch program.

It goes without saying that we have an obligation to ensure the safety of the food that our children eat. But this incident raises very alarming questions about the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s ability to monitor the safety of meat in this country – including the meat that is being served to children in the National School Lunch program. I hope we can begin to answer some of those questions in today’s hearing.

In addition, along with Congresswomen McCarthy and DeLauro, I have asked the U.S. Government Accountability Office to assess the overall effectiveness of the USDA’s work to ensure the safety of meat in the school food supply.

Already, however, it’s clear that more must be done to ensure the safety of the meat that all consumers – including schoolchildren – eat.

For starters, the USDA needs to provide more assistance and guidance to states and locals related to food safety issues. As it stands, schools have only a limited capacity to quickly track, handle and dispose of dangerous food.

Schools and parents should have every assurance that the food supplied to their kids' cafeterias by the federal government is safe.

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses for joining us today, and I look forward to your testimony. Thank you.

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