



# The Food Safety Unit

Established November 2004

2006 Annual Report

## VISION:

To eliminate all food safety hazards in foods provided through the USDA nutrition assistance programs.

## MISSION:

To increase awareness, visibility, and impact of food safety on USDA nutrition assistance programs and represent FNS programs in the wider Federal and State food safety community.

## The FNS Food Safety Unit Advances the USDA Strategic Goals:

**Goal 4: Enhance Protection and Safety of the Nation's Agriculture and Food Supply**

**Goal 5: Improve the Nation's Nutrition and Health**

## Highlights of 2006:

### I. Support Special Nutrition Programs:

- Food Distribution Programs
  - Manage Hold and Recall Procedures
  - Commodity Food Safety Complaint System
  - Recall Bulletins and Food Safety Messages on ECOS
- Child Nutrition Programs:
  - Resources for the School Food Safety Program based on HACCP Principles per the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004
  - Education and Outreach to Regulators on Mandatory Food Safety Inspections

### II. Overall Agency Support

- Regional Office Support on Recall and Food Safety Matters
- Data Analysis
- Education and Outreach at State, Regional, and National Meetings
- Avian Influenza and Pandemic Planning

### III. Food Defense Activities: White House Directives: Homeland Security Presidential Directives (HSPD) 7 & 9

#### HSPD 7:

- Vulnerability Assessments on Specific USDA Commodities
- Strategic Partnership Program on Agroterrorism (SPPA)

#### HSPD 9:

- FERN (Food Emergency Response Network) Project
- Surveillance and Communication
- Food Defense Training and Tools

**Introduction:** November 2006 marked the two-year anniversary of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Food Safety Unit (FSU) as a focal point for cross-agency food safety initiatives that emphasize the Department's commitment to food safety and food safety education for operators and recipients of FNS nutrition assistance programs. This report highlights the contributions of the FSU to the missions of the Agency and the Department.

## **FSU Supports Food Distribution Programs:**

### **Recall Management:**

In 2006, the FSU handled four administrative recalls using the Rapid Alert System:

**March:** canned chicken (A562) was recalled due to a packaging problem that caused the lids and bottoms of cans to bulge. It involved 10 states with direct shipments and 11 states with multi-food shipments.

**August:** hams (A693) were recalled because the packaging was split on the processing line while being boxed. The recall involved 13,000 cases of product in 7 States.

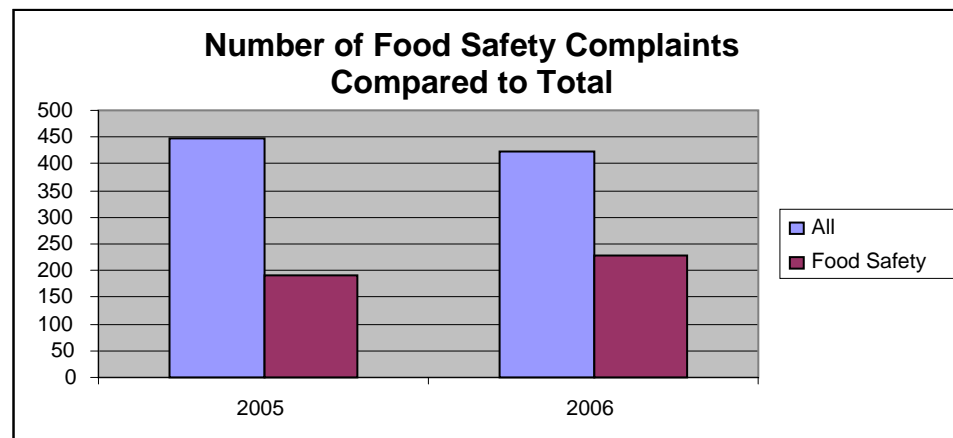
**November:** 235 cases of diced chicken (A517) were recalled in Colorado due to the presence of generic *E. coli*.

**December:** 9,300 cases of frozen, whole eggs (A568) were replaced or disposed of in 4 states due to organoleptically unacceptable smell.

### **Commodity Food Safety Complaint System:**

The FSU monitors and analyzes food safety complaints for indicators of vendor performance; whether commodity specifications need modification; and whether and what food handling or safety messages are needed. When the FSU receives a complaint that might be a food safety concern, it:

- Determines whether it is a food safety concern, and if so, how serious
- Contacts the appropriate procurement and regulatory agencies
- Follows-up with complainant for resolution to the problem
- Records the information in a database for further analysis



## **Posting Non-commodity Recall and General Food Safety Messages on the Electronic Commodity Ordering System (ECOS) Home Page**

In the fall of 2006, the FSU posted two significant recalls on spinach and peanut butter to the ECOS home page. Although these were not commodity products, ECOS users were given current information and links to other web postings by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

- Spinach recall, contaminated with *E. coli*
- Peanut butter, contaminated with *Salmonella*

In September, 2006, food safety messages were posted on the ECOS home page to highlight food safety messages in honor of Food Safety Education Month and National Chicken Month:

- Poultry safety messages posted on ECOS throughout September

How to salvage canned goods after a flood was an important topic after Hurricane Katrina, but multiple federal agencies issued conflicting messages. The FSU triggered and coordinated a multi-agency effort with the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), FDA, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to construct a consistent message on handling canned foods affected by flood waters. The message was released prior to the 2006 hurricane season.

- How to salvage canned goods after a flood posted to ECOS
- Also posted to the Food Safety link on the FNS home page

## **FSU Supports Child Nutrition Programs:**

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 mandated a school food safety program based on Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles. In 2005, the FSU developed and distributed “Guidance for School Food Authorities: Developing a School Food Safety Program Based on the Process Approach to HACCP Principles.” In 2006, the FSU and the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) developed the following companion materials:

- Self-instructional video with complementary workbook and template for program cooperators to help schools develop and implement their own plans. It can be downloaded at:  
[http://www.nfsmi.org/Information/school\\_fs\\_program.html](http://www.nfsmi.org/Information/school_fs_program.html).

Mandatory second inspections also stemmed from the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. In 2006, the FSU provided:

- On-going education and outreach to regulators concerning the requirement for two health inspections
- A total of 19 presentations around the country informing States and health officials of the new requirement in addition to the 135 presentations made to school officials by the NFSMI under a grant provided by the FSU.

## Overall Agency Support:

- Regional Office Support
- Data Analysis
- Education and Outreach (Presentations)
- Avian Influenza and Pandemic Planning

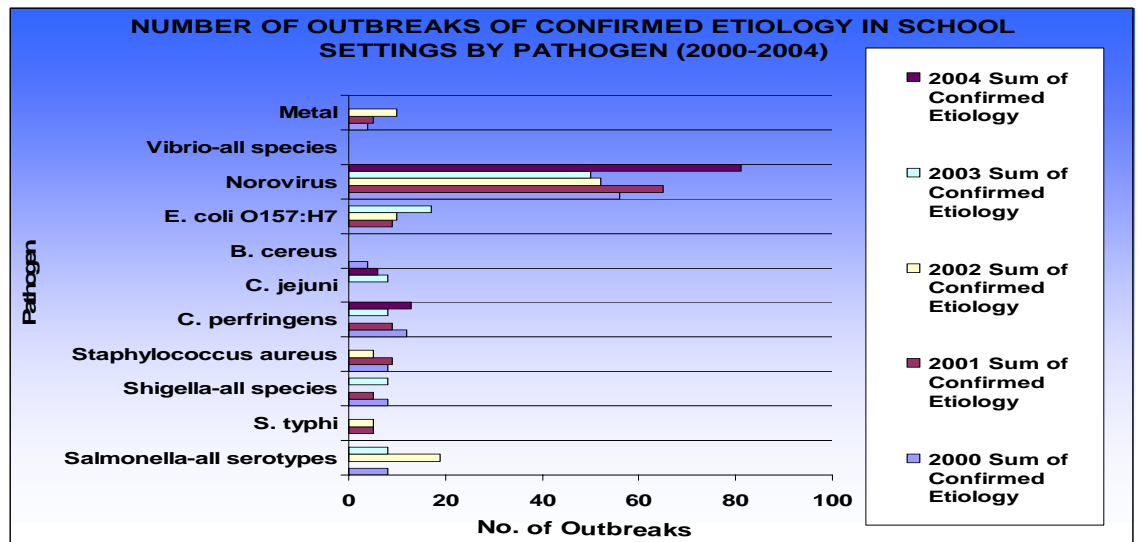
## Regional Office Support:

The FSU holds a monthly conference call with representatives from the regional offices (ROs) to share up-to-date food safety information; review commodity complaints from the previous month; and report on all food safety activities occurring at headquarters, some of which involve RO participation, such as recalls or special projects. Additionally, the FSU sends daily food safety information bulletins; notifies them of commodity and non-commodity recalls; and maintains a food safety mailbox to handle questions from the field.

## Data Analysis:

The FSU conducts analyses of school foodborne illness from the CDC Electronic Foodborne Outbreak Reporting System (eFORS) database that captures the causes of foodborne illness in schools. This information indicates what educational and training messages are needed to instruct schools about how to mitigate these hazards.

- Findings of the first analysis of these CDC data revealed that norovirus is the leading cause of foodborne illness in schools, as depicted in this graph:



## Education and Outreach through Presentations:

The FSU made 16 presentations across the country to promote food safety and food defense, including:

- American Public Health Association Annual Meeting
- National Environmental Health Association Annual Meeting
- Rocky Mountain Food Safety Conference
- FSIS Food Safety Education Conference
- Three FNS Regional Office State Directors' meetings
- School Nutrition Association (SNA) Annual National Conference
- Several State SNA meetings.

### **Avian Influenza and Pandemic Planning:**

To support the Agency's activities in the early discussions on avian influenza and pandemic planning, the FSU:

- Brought in a physician to speak to several representatives of various FNS programs about pandemics and potential strategies for planning
- Made a presentation to the Associate Administrator and members of the Food Stamp Program Office, and other areas of the Agency
- Helped plan and execute an agency sponsored stakeholders meeting on pandemic planning issues

The FSU follows Departmental avian influenza issues closely by sending a representative to weekly Departmental level meetings, which keeps the Agency updated on new developments and voices agency concerns on the topic.

### **FSU Supports FNS Food Defense Activities and Homeland Security:**

#### **White House Directives: Homeland Security Presidential Directives 7 & 9**

*HSPD 7 established a national policy for Federal departments and agencies to identify and prioritize United States critical infrastructure and key resources and to protect them from terrorist attacks. Activities related to HSPD 7:*

- Vulnerability Assessments
- Strategic Partnership Program on Agroterrorism (SPPA)

The FSU participated in a **vulnerability assessment** on bagged lettuce with the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), FDA, and FSIS and partnered with the American Commodity Distribution Association (ACDA) subcommittee on food safety/food defense to develop a handbook for States on what to do in a homeland security emergency.

In addition, the FSU was integral in participating in a **SPPA** exercise with the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), FSIS, AMS, and the State of North Carolina that conducted an in-depth vulnerability assessment of a school food service central kitchen. After the exercise, the FSU assisted with the classification of the document.

*HSPD 9 identified the agriculture and food sector as critical infrastructure and further established a national policy to defend this sector against terrorist attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies. Activities related to HSPD 9:*

- Food Emergency Response Network (FERN) Project
- Surveillance and Communication
- Food Defense Training and Resource Development for FNS Programs

**FERN:** The Food Emergency Response Network (FERN) project tested laboratory and communication networks for the prevention of and reaction to terrorist attacks involving the food and agriculture sector, specifically in the National School Lunch Program. This exercise involved three States (MN, NJ, and SD). Samples of fine ground beef were taken at the processing plant and at the respective State warehouse and tested for threat agents. The results were communicated to all parties involved.

**Surveillance** of the commodity food supply is accomplished by constant monitoring of the food safety complaints in ECOS that alert the FSU to potential threats to commodity foods. In 2006, the FSU noticed a complaint of possible tampering in chicken fajita meat and alerted other agencies to the problem, which resulted in a full investigation by FSIS and OIG and removal of the product from service to students.

**Food Defense Training** is covered through the FSU speaking engagements for program operators. In 2006, the FSU made many presentations on food safety and food defense and, in cooperation with NFSMI, developed and distributed a Food Defense Resource Kit containing a video and an interactive CD-ROM to more than 20,000 school districts.

### **Projected Outputs for 2007:**

- **Food Safety Education and Outreach**
  - On-going education (in conjunction with NFSMI)
  - Support FNS regional offices (presentations, requests)
  - Target messages derived from complaint and CDC eFORS data
- **Food Defense**
  - Food Defense Surveillance Assignment
  - Table Top Exercises
  - On-going outreach and education
- **Holdings and Recalls**
  - Revise “Responding to a Food Recall,” originally released in 2002
  - Append food defense procedures to the Hold and Recall document
  - Delineate procedures for Administrative Recalls
  - Work with States to develop a tracking system for commodities

### **Projects Beyond 2007, subject to availability of funds:**

- Conduct further research on the causes of foodborne illness in schools using CDC eFORS data
- Develop educational messages based on findings from FSU analyses of CDC eFORS data
- Submit requests to federal partners for research on sanitizers for fresh fruits and vegetables used in schools
- Support educational initiatives on foodborne norovirus prevention and control
- Develop validated parameters for heating and cooling in school food service operations
- Investigate the identified trouble areas in school food service, such as hot/cold holding, cooling, transportation, and receiving
- Expand the Rapid Alert System to be a two-way notification system
- Develop milestones in conjunction with Healthy People 2010 to reduce anaphylactic reactions to food among susceptible school children and work with FDA to develop instructional materials for schools per the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004.

