



The Food Safety Staff

Established November 2004

2008 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.

Summary of 2008

I. New Initiatives

- Allergies and Anaphylaxis
- Cooling Study
- Norovirus Intervention and Prevention
- Tabletop Exercises

II. Commodity Food Safety

- Holds and Recalls
- Public Notification System for Holds and Recalls
- Non-Commodity Recall Bulletins
- Commodity Food Safety Complaint System

III. Technical Assistance for FNS Programs

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- The National Food Service Management Institute
- Presentations
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- Publications
- Recognition from Food and Drug Administration

Introduction

In 2008, the Office of Emergency Management and Food Safety (OEMFS) Food Safety Staff (FSS) received additional funding from Congress that allowed the initiation of a number of exciting new and expanded projects. These new projects fill identified needs related to food allergies, proper cooling of foods, norovirus intervention and prevention, and food defense. The unparalleled recall of ground beef by Hallmark/Westland in early 2008 consumed an exceptional amount of FSS time and effort. Lessons learned from the recall are being incorporated into a new manual on management of holds and recalls.

New Initiatives

Allergies and Anaphylaxis

In 2008, the FSS addressed the emerging topic of managing food allergies and anaphylaxis in schools by working with the Child Nutrition Division and the Office of Civil Rights at FNS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the School Nutrition Association (SNA), and others to plan a three-day meeting in early 2009 on managing food allergies in schools. The meeting would be comprised of an Expert Panel and Work Group who will be charged with the task to develop comprehensive guidance on food allergy policies and practices for the school

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community as a whole: policy makers, administrators, teachers, students, parents, food service personnel, clinicians, and others. School nutrition experts who are leaders on the topic of management of allergies in school food service operations will be asked to provide best practices guidance for food service for inclusion in this guidance.

Cooling Practices in Schools Multiyear Research Project

Data from CDC, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and others have shown that improper cooling practices contribute to foodborne illness outbreaks. As schools developed and implemented their HACCP-based food safety plans, the FSS was asked questions about techniques for proper cooling of food in school food service. To address this need, the FSS began a multi-year research project on cooling practices in schools. The study is a collaborative effort with the FDA and the Moffett Center, which is a consortium of the Illinois Institute of Technology that will provide data on the effectiveness of current cooling practices in school food service operations, with attention paid to improving practices that may compromise the safety of the foods. Ultimately, the data yielded by these studies will be made available to school food service operators through the National Food Service Management Institute in an educational package.

Norovirus Outbreak Intervention and Prevention

Data from CDC indicate that norovirus is the leading cause of foodborne outbreaks in schools. Norovirus is an extremely infectious pathogen that spreads rapidly and easily. A critical intervention strategy to prevent its rapid spread is the use of proper cleaning techniques that destroy the pathogen. Most school buildings are cleaned by school custodial staff, while the school food service operation is cleaned by school food service staff. The FSS, through a funded agreement with the National Education Association Health Information Network, will develop a resource, intended for school custodians and school food service staff, on cleaning in school settings to limit, or prevent, a norovirus outbreak.

Tabletop Exercises

The FSS continues to raise awareness of the need for vigilance in protecting the food supply in FNS programs from an intentional attack, particularly in schools. As part of these efforts, FNS is expanding a project to conduct three tabletop exercises (TTX), the first of which will happen in the fall of 2009. From these TTXs pre-packaged exercises that qualify for Department of Homeland Security grants will be developed for schools and school districts, or State Agencies, to use and practice communication and cooperation strategies during a mock intentional attack on the school food supply.

Commodity Food Safety

Holds and Recalls

Canned Beans: 14,000 cases of canned beans, including green beans (A061), garbanzo beans (A089), lima beans (A082), black-eyed peas (A084), kidney beans (A086), great northern beans (A086), vegetarian baked beans (A091), pinto beans (A079), and black turtle beans (A908) from 8 states were returned to the vendor or destroyed when the product was recalled in January and February 2008 due to possible under-processing and a risk of botulism.

Ground Beef: 51,000,000 pounds of ground beef and ground beef products (A594, A608, A609, A626, A706, A716, A717) from 46 States and the District of Columbia were recalled after the producer failed to comply with USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) regulations regarding humane slaughter. Of the recalled product, 18,000,000 pounds were returned to the vendor or destroyed. This was the largest recall of USDA-distributed food in FNS history. It was also the first recall that involved product that was sent for further processing.

Spaghetti Sauce: 3,752 cases of spaghetti sauce (A243) from 3 states were put on hold after some cans in one warehouse were reported as bulging and exploding. FDA laboratory analysis revealed isolated closure problems in some of the cans.

Public Notification System for Holds and Recalls

The FSS and the FNS Food Distribution Division (FDD) created a new public notification system to alert interested parties of FNS holds and recalls. The system allows members of the public, recipient agencies, processors, schools, and others who do not receive notifications through the ECOS rapid alert system to sign up for email notifications via a link on the FNS webpage.

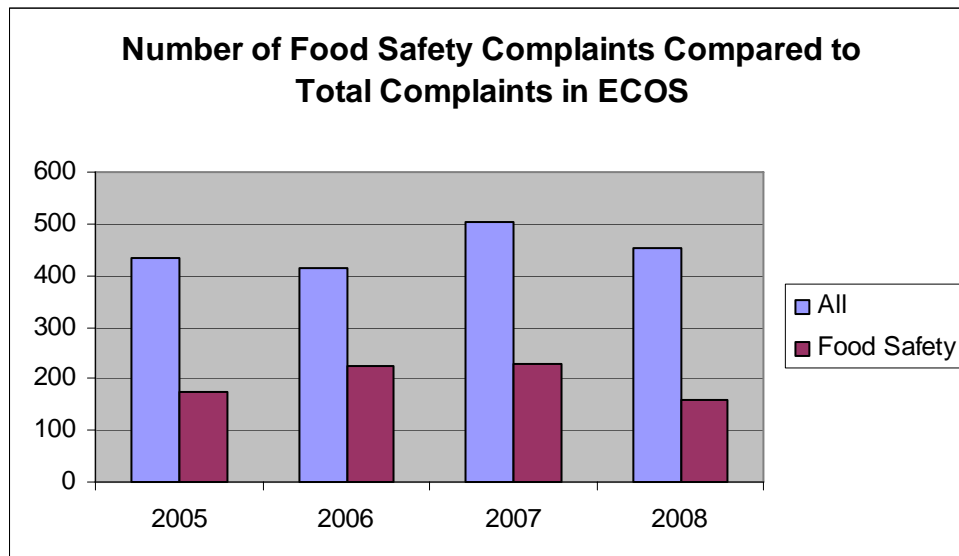
Posting Non-Commodity Recall Bulletins on the Electronic Commodity Ordering System (ECOS) Home Page

The FSS helps ensure that all foods served by FNS program operators are safe and wholesome. When the FSS is notified of significant recalls of non-commodity products that may have been procured by states or schools from commercial sources, the recall information is posted to the ECOS home page. ECOS users are given a summary and links to further information posted by FDA and FSIS. In 2008, the following recalls and health alerts were posted to ECOS:

- Canned beans, potentially contaminated with botulinum toxin
- Four bean salad, potentially contaminated with botulinum toxin
- Cantaloupe, contaminated with *Salmonella*
- Puffed wheat and rice cereal, contaminated with *Salmonella*
- Ground beef, contaminated with *E. coli* (2 recalls)
- Tomatoes, jalapeno peppers, and serrano peppers, linked to *Salmonella*
- Jalapeno and serrano peppers and avocados, contaminated with *Salmonella*

Commodity Food Safety Complaint System

The FSS monitors and analyzes complaints about USDA-purchased commodities for potential food safety concerns. Complaints are entered into ECOS and automatically flagged for a food safety review based on the problem description. When a complaint is received, it is reviewed by the FSS to determine whether it is a food safety concern or part of a larger trend. If necessary, the FSS contacts the appropriate procurement and regulatory agencies, follows up with the complainant for additional information, and works closely with the FNS FDD's Complaint Team to ensure resolution. Periodically, complaint data are reviewed for indicators of vendor performance; whether commodity specifications need modification; and whether and what food handling or safety messages are needed.



Technical Assistance for FNS Programs

The FSS provided food safety expertise for a variety of FNS programs.

Assistance Provided to Program Service and Support, including the Regional Offices:

- Led monthly conference calls with Regional Office (RO) representatives to share up-to-date food safety information; review commodity complaints from the previous month; and report on all food safety activities at headquarters, some of which involve RO participation, such as recalls or special projects; sent daily food safety information bulletins; notified them of commodity and non-commodity recalls
- Assisted Regional Office staff with a question from a State Agency about the labeling of bread
- Maintained a food safety mailbox to handle questions from consumers and the field
- Answered questions about the Food Emergency Response Network (FERN) for Regional Office Staff
- Clarified policies regarding security seals on trucks for Regional Office Staff

Assistance Provided to FNS Office of Research and Analysis:

- Submitted questions on traceability of inventory and food safety criteria for procurement for inclusion in the upcoming School Food Purchase Study III
- Submitted questions on a variety of food safety topics for the fourth School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study

Assistance Provided to Special Nutrition Programs:

- Arranged for a review by the USDA Food Safety Risk Assessment Committee of the petition to discontinue testing agricultural commodities for *StarLink* corn contamination
- Provided guidance on the food safety implications of donating feral hogs to charitable institutions

Food Distribution Division:

- Served as subject matter expert on holds and recalls for a webinar on USDA Foods
- Contacted FSIS to answer a question from a State Agency funneled through the Food Distribution Division on the use of antibiotics in poultry feed
- Assisted FDD in responding to a Freedom of Information Act request on a commercial beef recall

Child Nutrition Division:

- Answered questions from the Child Nutrition Division regarding methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and the use of school gymnasiums as cafeterias

The Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC):

- Provided guidance to staff from the Supplemental Food Program Division (SFPD) on food safety information for the new WIC Food Package
- Answered questions about the potential for microbial contamination of tofu and processing of honey for SFPD
- Reviewed the food safety information provided in the WIC infant feeding guide
- Provided guidance to Special Nutrition Programs (SNP) about using bottled water to mix powdered infant formula during a disaster
- Provided technical assistance to the SNP office regarding how perchlorate and bisphenol-A affect the health of FNS program participants
- Served as a resource on the issue of melamine in the food supply, specifically infant formula
- Tracked the potential association of an infant death due to *Enterobacter sakazakii* with infant formula

Assistance Provided to Outside Organizations:

- Assisted America's Second Harvest with donation regulation questions on whether their routine practices and operations surrounding meat donations from retail outlets was in compliance with regulations from FSIS
- Assisted a state department of agriculture in determining the inspections necessary for an establishment serving the Child and Adult Care Food Program in compliance with regulations from FSIS
- Provided data to Government Accountability Office (GAO) for a report on communication during recalls in schools

Outreach and Partnerships

Cooperative Agreement with the National Food Service Management Institute

FSS worked closely with the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) on food safety education and training for Child Nutrition (CN) Programs nationwide. In 2008, NFSMI continued providing training for CN Program operators and made progress on major projects such as the Emergency Management Training, which includes a Train-the-Trainer manual and a Participant Workbook with templates for easily constructing emergency management plans.

Presentations

The FSS uses presentations at professional and educational meetings to reach out to FNS Regional and State partners and FNS program operators. The FSS addressed groups across the country to promote food safety and food defense:

- American Commodity Distribution Association National Conference
- School Nutrition Association Annual National Conference
- National Center for Food Protection and Defense Annual Meeting
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Fall Conference for Child Nutrition Program Administrators
- FD101 Training

Partnerships

Partnership with other agencies and organizations helps the FSS disseminate messages about food safety and food defense. 2008 activities:

- Led the National Coalition for Food Safe Schools (NCFSS), an alliance of representatives from a variety of national organizations, professional associations, and government agencies
- Member of the Steering Committee and participated in the annual vision meeting of the CDC Environmental Health Specialists Network (EHS-Net)
- Member of and financial contributor to the National Academies of Science's Food Forum
- Participated in the Partnership for Food Safety Education
- Participated in a summit on ways to improve information sharing and coordination when a foodborne outbreak involves many jurisdictions, such as local and state health departments and federal health investigators
- Conducted an epidemiological activity for students on a Foodborne Outbreak Investigation at the FSIS Food Safety Education Camp
- Member of the Interagency Risk Assessment Consortium (IRAC) and the USDA Food Safety Risk Assessment Committee (FSRAC)

Publications

The FSS includes food safety messages in newsletters and publications of partner groups:

- Article on food defense for the *Gardian*, an electronic newsletter for members of Infragard- a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) program that features a partnership between the FBI and the public/private security sector
- Article on safety of fresh produce for the FDPIR newsletter
- Article on allergies for the FDD Schools newsletter
- Reviewed a publication on foodborne illnesses in schools for the National School Boards Association

Recognized for Collaboration with Food and Drug Administration

In 2008, the FSS received three group awards from FDA for collaboration on food safety projects or committees. The first award recognized FSS participation in the Botulinum Toxin Response Group and superior collaboration and response to the outbreak of botulinum toxin in canned chili sauce during the summer of 2007. A second award recognized the pivotal contribution of FNS toward the FDA Food Defense Surveillance Assignment that relied heavily on the collaboration of school food service, which FNS arranged. The third award acknowledged FSS membership and participation in the Interagency Risk Assessment Consortium Group and the

contribution made toward providing a public forum for discussing risk assessment issues as they relate to keeping food and water safe for public consumption.

Projected Outputs for 2009

- Initiatives
 - Develop food allergy management best practices guidance and resources for schools as outcome of the February 2009 Expert Panel and Work Group
 - Collaborate with SNA to conduct a pre-conference workshop on food allergies, and to develop three webinars and several podcasts on food allergy management
 - Collect data on the effectiveness of current cooling practices in school food service and begin to package results for use in schools
 - Publish guide on cleaning to prevent or limit a norovirus outbreak in schools for school custodians and other staff with the National Education Association Health Information Network
 - Conduct three tabletop exercises focusing on communication and cooperation during a mock intentional attack on the school food supply
- Technical Assistance
 - Respond to technical assistance requests by Child Nutrition, Food Distribution, and WIC program staff
 - Continue working with Regional Office staff on food safety concerns
- Outreach and Partnerships
 - On-going education (in conjunction with NFSMI) including presentations at conferences, meetings, and workshops
 - Evaluate, update, and revise the *Food Safe Schools Action Guide*, including drafting a food defense component
 - Evaluate implementation of HACCP in schools, in conjunction with NFSMI

Projects Beyond 2009

- Increase education on food allergies and anaphylaxis in schools
- Create guidance for schools on the safe handling and sanitizing of fresh produce
- Provide guidance to schools on proper cooling of foods
- Coordinate with CDC on refinement of data analysis from eFORS and increase reporting of school food-borne outbreaks
- Disseminate, promote, and implement the revised edition of the *Food Safe Schools Action Guide*, which includes a recognition program for schools for food safety efforts
- Assist with transition of the Rapid Alert System to be a component of the Web-Based Supply Chain Management (WBSCM) system
- Develop a turn-key tabletop exercise resource for State Agencies and School Food Authorities that would meet DHS criteria for grant funding