

FOOD SAFETY WORKING GROUP: KEY FINDINGS

We are a nation built on the strength of individual initiative. But there are certain things that we can't do on our own. There are certain things that only a government can do. And one of those things is ensuring that the foods we eat ...are safe and don't cause us harm.

*President Barack Obama
March 14, 2009*

OVERVIEW

Americans count on the safety of their food. Whether enjoying fruits and vegetables, grilling meat at a barbecue or packing our children's lunches for school, we expect quality and nutritional value without having to worry about whether food has been handled properly or whether it contains bacteria or viruses that can make us sick.

Yet all too often, outbreaks of foodborne illness still threaten the health of Americans. While the American food safety system is among the best in the world, batches of ground beef, peppers, peanut butter, pistachios, spinach, and even cookie dough have been associated with serious disease in recent years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported some discouraging news: according to preliminary data from 2008, a long-term decline in foodborne illness appears to be stalling. The agency concluded that "the lack of recent progress points to gaps in the current food safety system and the need to continue to develop and evaluate food safety practices as food moves from the farm to the table."¹ It is estimated that one in four Americans suffers from a foodborne illness each year.

President Barack Obama recognizes the importance of food safety to Americans. He created a Food Safety Working Group to coordinate Federal efforts and develop short- and long-term agendas to make food safer. He has urged Congress to modernize our food safety laws for both the Food and Drug Administration and the Food Safety and Inspection Service. And he has asked for public input from around the country, seeking fresh ideas for food safety.

In the coming months, at President Obama's direction, the U.S. government will take long overdue action to protect American families from foodborne illness. This action includes new rules and standards to reduce dangerous infections caused by *Salmonella* and *E. coli* O157:H7, better approaches to outbreak response, and vastly improved Federal coordination of food safety efforts.

Together, these initial efforts represent a down payment on a stronger food safety system that will deliver greater value, more thoroughly prevent illnesses and more effectively promote the health and well-being of the American people.

THE CHALLENGE OF ENSURING A SAFE FOOD SUPPLY

Over the last decade, a perfect storm has gathered to challenge our food safety system. The storm includes new disease agents; an increasingly globalized food supply chain; changes in the U.S. population; and new dietary patterns.

¹ Preliminary FoodNet Data on the Incidence of Infection with Pathogens Transmitted Commonly Through Food --- 10 States, 2008, MMWR 58(13): 333-337, April 10, 2009.

The world increasingly recognizes the growing threat of intentional contamination. When bad actors in China's food industry deliberately added melamine to ingredients in a wide range of food products, they threatened the health of millions of men, women, and children. Most tragically, six babies in China died from kidney failure caused by melamine-contaminated infant formula. A new food safety system requires the scientific expertise to identify risks before they harm Americans.

Modern food conveniences also create new challenges for safety. The United States imports food from more than 150 different countries through more than 300 ports of entry. About half of fresh fruits eaten in America are grown outside of the country; these imports allow us to enjoy our favorite produce year-round. More than three-quarters of our seafood comes from non-U.S. waters. Trade in food is critical to our diet and permits our farmers and other food producers to sell their goods abroad. Yet it also means that real progress in food safety requires renewed attention to the global food supply.

Changes in the U.S. population and in our eating behaviors increase the urgency of food safety reform. By 2015, it is estimated that one in five Americans will be over the age of 60 and therefore more susceptible to certain types of infections. As more Americans live longer with chronic illness, including cancer and diabetes, our vulnerability will increase further. At the same time, approximately 50 cents of every food dollar is now spent on food prepared outside the home in restaurants, vending machines, movie theaters, and schools. This development has many consequences for food safety, such as the need to ensure adequate training for food service workers across the country and to consider the potential widespread impact of deliberate tampering with the food supply.

Taken together, these important trends mean that a modern food safety system must do more than rely on a fixed set of rules and regulations. The United States needs a flexible and coordinated approach to ensure the safety of the food supply, able to evolve as quickly as do the threats to the food supply.

Unfortunately, the nation's food safety system is anything but flexible and coordinated. Our system is hamstrung by outdated laws, insufficient resources, suboptimal management structures, and poor coordination across agencies and with States and localities. At least a dozen Federal agencies, implementing at least 30 different laws, have roles in overseeing the safety of the nation's food supply. This approach was not rationally designed. Rather, it developed in fits and starts as the nation's attention turned to one crisis after another. Building a new system will require recognizing the critical importance of a closely coordinated system.

THE PRESIDENT'S FOOD SAFETY WORKING GROUP

On March 14, 2009, President Barack Obama announced the creation of a new Food Safety Working Group to advise him on how to upgrade U.S. food safety laws for the 21st century, foster coordination of food safety efforts throughout the government, and ensure laws are being adequately enforced to keep the American people safe from foodborne illness.

The Working Group is chaired by Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. Participating agencies include the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Commerce, the Department of State, the Environmental Protection Agency, and several offices of the White House.

To gather input from all corners of the country, the Working Group held a public Listening Day on May 13, 2009, with extensive participation by States and localities, the food industry, consumer advocates, and other experts. The Working Group also created a website, www.foodsafetyworkinggroup.gov, which offers the opportunity for any member of the public to submit comments.

On July 1, 2009, the Working Group submitted its general principles to the President. The Working Group identified three core food safety principles to guide the development of a modern, coordinated food safety system.

- *Principle 1: Preventing harm to consumers is our first priority:* Too often in the past, the food safety system has focused on reacting to problems rather than preventing harm in the first place. The Working Group recommends that food regulators shift towards prioritizing prevention and move aggressively to implement sensible measures designed to prevent problems before they occur. Key to this approach is setting rigorous standards for food safety and providing regulatory agencies the tools necessary to ensure that the food industry meets these standards.
- *Principle 2: Effective food safety inspections and enforcement depend upon good data and analysis.* High-quality information will help leading agencies know which foods are at risk; which solutions should be put into place; and who should be responsible. The Working Group recommends that the Federal government prioritize crucial inspection and enforcement activity across the world; support safety efforts by States, localities and businesses at home; and utilize data to guide these efforts and evaluate their outcomes.
- *Principle 3: Outbreaks of foodborne illness should be identified quickly and stopped.* The Working Group recommends the establishment of a food tracing system that shortens the time between outbreak detection, resolution, and recovery. It is in everyone's interest for outbreaks to be rare in number, limited in scale, and short in duration.

DELIVERING RESULTS

The recommendations of the Working Group apply these principles to the current food safety system, taking on long-standing challenges while seeking to ensure that we build on past success. At the President's direction, agencies are starting immediately to implement long-overdue actions to improve the safety of the U.S. food supply. The following are some key Executive Branch actions that will help achieve these goals:

Salmonella

Salmonella bacteria cause an estimated 1.3 million illnesses each year in the United States – including fever, diarrhea, and even death. The CDC has found that *Salmonella* is the most common bacterial cause of foodborne illness.

Two Federal agencies are now making progress to reduce illness caused by *Salmonella*.

- **Preventing *Salmonella* in Eggs:** For more than a decade, it has been known that eggs are a leading cause of *Salmonella* illnesses. Despite support from consumer advocates and the egg industry, the Federal government has been unable to finalize basic rules on egg safety to prevent contamination. On July 7, 2009, The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is issuing a final rule to control *Salmonella* contamination of eggs during production. This rule is estimated to reduce the number of foodborne illnesses associated with consumption of raw or undercooked contaminated shell eggs by approximately 60%, or 79,000 illnesses every year and will generate annual savings of over \$ 1 billion.
- **Cutting *Salmonella* Risk in Poultry Products:** FSIS is also taking action on preventing illnesses caused by *Salmonella*. By the end of the year, the agency will develop new standards to reduce the prevalence of *Salmonella* in turkeys and poultry. The agency will also establish a *Salmonella* verification program with the goal of having 90 percent of poultry establishments meeting the new standards by the end of 2010.

***E. coli* O157:H7**

The bacterial strain called *E. coli* O157:H7 causes diarrhea, abdominal pain, and fever in approximately 70,000 Americans each year. In an estimated one in 15 patients, a frightening complication called Hemolytic-Uremic Syndrome develops. Patients with this complication can suffer intense pain, high blood pressure, kidney failure, and even death. In recent years, this bacterium has caused outbreaks associated with meat and spinach.

- **Stepped Up Enforcement in Beef Facilities:** By the end of July, FSIS will issue improved instructions to its workforce on how to verify that establishments that handle beef are acting to reduce the presence of *E. coli*. Also by the end of July, FSIS will increase its sampling to find this pathogen, focusing largely on the components that go into making ground beef.
- **Preventing Contamination of Leafy Greens, Melons, and Tomatoes:** By the end of July, FDA will issue commodity-specific draft guidance on preventive controls that industry can implement to reduce the risk of microbial contamination in the production and distribution of tomatoes, melons, and leafy greens. These proposals will help the Federal government establish a minimum standard for production across the country. Over the next two years, FDA will seek public comment and work to require adoption of these approaches through regulation.

National Traceback and Response System

When people begin to fall ill after an outbreak occurs, time is of the essence. A system that permits rapid traceback to the source will protect consumers and help industry recover faster. Yet despite the dedicated efforts of food safety officials across the country, our current capacity to traceback the sources of illness suffers from serious limitations. Public and private sector officials often lack information about the sources of foods or ingredients, making the traceback process more cumbersome and leading to less-accurately targeted recalls. In addition, multiple Federal, State, and local agencies all play essential roles in managing outbreaks but lack a unified structure or adequate provisions for sharing data in an emergency. These limitations make it essential for Federal agencies to improve the traceability of food and the response to outbreaks of foodborne illness.

- **Developing Industry Product Tracing Systems:** Within three months, FDA will issue draft guidance on steps the food industry can take to establish product tracing systems to improve our national capacity for detecting the origins of foodborne illness.
- **Creating a Unified Incident Command System:** Within three months, Federal agencies will implement a new incident command system to address outbreaks of foodborne illness. This approach will link all relevant agencies, as well as state and local governments, more effectively, facilitating communication and decision-making in an emergency.
- **Strengthening the Public Health Epidemiology Program:** Within six to twelve months, FSIS will improve collaboration with states by increasing the capacity of its successful public health epidemiology liaison program to State Public Health Departments through additional hires and expanded outreach.
- **Updating Emergency Operations Procedures:** In July 2009, Federal food safety agencies will ask State and local agencies to update their emergency operations procedures to be consistent with the new “Guidelines for Foodborne Disease Outbreak Response” soon to be issued by the Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response. Implementation of these guidelines will lead to quicker response, better communication, and better coordination by all Federal, State, and local agencies.
- **Improving State Capacity:** The CDC will work with collaborating States to evaluate and optimize best practices for aggressive and rapid outbreak investigation, and will launch a new system to facilitate information-sharing and adoption of best practices within 12 months.

- **Using New Technologies to Communicate Critical Food Safety Information by Creating an Improved Individual Alert System:** The federal government will enhance www.foodsafety.gov to better communicate information to the public and include an improved individual alert system allowing consumers to receive food safety information, such as notification of recalls. Agencies will also use social media to expand public communications. The first stage of this process will be completed in 90 days.

Improved Organization of Federal Food Safety Responsibilities

Effective organization is essential to the performance of the food safety system. To build a more effective safety system, federal agencies need to improve management of their food safety responsibilities and coordinate more effectively with each other.

- **Strengthening Federal Coordination to Address Cross-Cutting Problems:** The Food Safety Working Group will serve as a mechanism to break down stovepipes, address cross-cutting issues and increase coordination of food safety activities across the U.S. government. HHS and USDA will continue to serve as the Working Group's leadership, bringing information and experience from the front lines of food safety to their sister agencies across the government. The Group will monitor the implementation of its recommendations, regularly assess performance metrics, ensure that food safety policies are adequately coordinated with efforts to safeguard the food supply from deliberate tampering, and respond to new challenges.
- **Clarifying Responsibilities and Improving Accountability:** In July 2009, FDA will create a new position, Deputy Commissioner for Foods, to oversee and coordinate its efforts on food, including food safety. This position, reporting to the Commissioner, will be empowered to restructure and revitalize FDA's activities and work with FSIS, and other agencies, in developing a new food safety system. Within the next three months, USDA will create a new position, Chief Medical Officer, at FSIS. This position will report to the Under Secretary for Food Safety, and will enhance USDA's commitment to preventing foodborne illness.
- **Modernizing Statutes:** The Administration will work with Congress on critical legislation that will provide key tools for FDA, FSIS, and the federal government to keep food safe. These tools include the ability to require sanitation and preventive controls at food facilities, based on a scientific hazard analysis; the ability to access basic food safety records at facilities; the ability to use resources flexibly to target food at the highest risk and achieve the maximum gain for public health; the ability to establish performance standards to measure the implementation of proper food safety procedures; and mandatory recall authority.

CONCLUSION

A safer food supply is an important national priority. Safer food means healthier children, longer lives, less costly healthcare, and a more resilient food industry. Federal leadership, along with strong cooperation from the public and private sectors, can achieve real progress for American consumers.