

SAFE FOOD COALITION

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August 4, 2006

Dear Senator/Representative:

The undersigned members of the Safe Food Coalition are deeply concerned about the shortfall in funding that is critically affecting the food safety responsibilities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). The Agency's inspection personnel are required by law to perform daily food safety inspections in our nation's 6,258 slaughter and processing plants. However, this vital service cannot be performed properly without dedicated funding from Congress so that the Agency can protect the public from the hazards of foodborne pathogens. We urge you to reinstate funding for the Agency, specifically dedicated for staffing, computer infrastructure, and critical food safety needs.

After several years of smaller budget cuts, the Bush Administration has forced all agencies to absorb a 1% rescission of their 2006 budget to support the huge costs of rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Due to the rescission and other factors, USDA's food safety program, which Congress had originally funded at \$837 million for FY 2006, will experience a massive shortfall during a time when it is also statutorily required to manage new inspection obligations at meat and poultry plants and absorb necessary payroll increases.

Under the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, and the Egg Products Inspection Act, FSIS is required to ensure the safety of all domestic and imported meat, poultry, and processed egg products. As a result of these statutory requirements, roughly 82% of the Agency's resources are dedicated to staffing and salaries. This leaves less than 20% that FSIS can use to cover program areas when their budget is cut. However, the agency does not have dedicated funding to cover program areas.

The total funding gap -- \$37.3 million -- will reduce funding to a number of critical programs, including:

- Assuring adequate staffing for FSIS to meet its statutory requirements for providing continuous inspection in all meat and poultry slaughter and processing plants
- Information technology infrastructure
- The Federal Emergency Response Network (FERN)
- Biosecurity
- Inspector training on pathogen reduction

- Microbiological Baseline Surveys
- Laboratory testing for meat and poultry

Without the necessary funding, fewer inspectors will be checking more meat than ever before. Because of the budget shortfall, FSIS is having a difficult time filling vacancies in some geographical areas, and is moving some food inspectors in and out of different positions to fill in where the gaps in coverage are greatest. Furthermore, the Safe Food Coalition has discovered through independent investigation that these vacancies are abundant across the country and are seriously impacting the ability of FSIS to fulfill its public health role. A sampling of districts across the country reveal significant shortfalls: the Raleigh district has an 11% vacancy rate, the Atlanta district has a 10% vacancy rate, the Jackson district has a 9% full-time and 19% part-time vacancy rate, and the Denver district has a 13% full-time vacancy rate. Of 59 plants in the Chicago district, a shocking 70% of the positions in these plants are vacant.

According to FSIS, inspector shortages have not affected the Agency's ability to perform its public health functions. However, the Agency admits that it has had to employ "alternative staffing strategies" that include field managers having to "double and triple up in order to cover shifts in some locations¹." Consequently, the Agency cannot inspect each plant every day, as statutorily mandated. Such "alternative staffing strategies" are not the way to ensure the safety of the U.S. food supply.

In addition, USDA is being forced to make other critical cuts in our food safety network. Training of food inspectors, public health veterinarians and enforcement officers is hovering at just over 50%², while the Agency's ability to maintain its critical information technology infrastructure is severely hampered. Without proper resources, the Agency is unable to properly train its personnel to perform the essential job of keeping our food supply safe. And without dedicated funding for technology, FSIS' antiquated and inefficient system cannot be maintained nor will it be able to provide consistent comparable data to FSIS managers, members of Congress or consumers who request it. Finally, USDA is being forced to reduce bioterrorism checks at plants and reduce intensive reviews at plants that consistently fail USDA's pathogen reduction program.

Clearly, the imposed funding cuts drastically limit FSIS' ability to ensure the safety of our food supply. Currently the Agency is shifting money from one program to another to cover unanticipated needs and cuts to its budget. Over the past several years, FSIS has been trying to perform its public health function with fewer and fewer resources. This is turning back the clock on food safety inspections, and the public health impact is already

¹ United States Congress. House of Representatives. Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies. Food Safety Programs and Farm and Foreign Agricultural Service Programs. Hearing 8 March 2006. 109th Cong., Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006.

² United States Congress. House of Representatives. Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies. Food Safety Programs and Farm and Foreign Agricultural Service Programs. Hearing 8 March 2006. 109th Cong., Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006.

being felt, as more outbreaks and illnesses are already being reported from poorly inspected foods coming to market³.

The undersigned members of the Safe Food Coalition are deeply concerned about the shortfall in funding and its consequent effect on the food safety responsibilities of FSIS. We urge you to reinstate funding for the Agency, specifically dedicated for staffing and critical food safety needs. We support House⁴ and Senate⁵ Appropriators' intent that priority should be given to existing personnel and operations critical to ensuring the safety of the U.S. food supply, and not for funding of new programs or activities.

Sincerely,

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Center for Science in the Public Interest

Chris Waldrop
Consumer Federation of America

Wenonah Hauter
Food & Water Watch

Jacqueline Ostfeld
Government Accountability Project

Alison Rein
National Consumers League

Barbara Kowalczyk
Safe Tables Our Priority

Michael J. Wilson
United Food and Commercial Workers Union

³ *Outbreak Alert!*, Center for Science in the Public Interest (unpublished 2004 data).

⁴ United States Cong. House of Representatives. 109th Congress, 2nd Session. Report 109-463 to HR.5384, Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 12 May 2006.

⁵ United States Cong. Senate. 109th Congress, 2nd Session. Report 109-266 to HR.5384, Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 22 June 2006.