

Biosecurity and the Food Supply

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Backgrounders/Key Facts, June 2002

For nearly a century, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been protecting the Nation's food supply. Over this long history, the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has developed the infrastructure needed to confront new biosecurity challenges. FSIS has more than 7,600 inspectors and veterinarians in meat, poultry, and egg product plants every day, and at ports-of-entry to prevent, detect, and act in response to food safety emergencies.

In January 2002, President Bush signed into law the FY 2002 Defense Appropriations Act, which includes \$328 million in emergency funding for the USDA to further protect the public by strengthening essential programs and services related to biosecurity issues. FSIS will receive \$16.5 million for security upgrades and bioterrorism protection. Of this amount, \$10 million is allocated to conduct a food safety, bioterrorism protection program. This includes education and specialized training for inspection personnel; technical assistance for State, local, and international food safety authorities; a biosecurity awareness campaign targeted to the general public and the regulated industry; and expanded FSIS laboratory capabilities to test meat and poultry products for bacterial and chemical agents. Five million is provided to strengthen biosecurity, physical security, cyber-security, and telecommunications at mission-critical facilities. The remaining \$1.5 million of these funds are being used to hire additional inspectors for imported meat and poultry. USDA is coordinating biosecurity issues with the new Office of Homeland Security.

Background:

FSIS, under its current name since 1981, has been protecting public health since 1906, when the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) signaled the real beginning of domestic inspection of meat and meat food products in the United States. The Act began a system of continuous, daily organoleptic (sight, smell, touch) inspection in slaughterhouses to detect unsanitary conditions and adulterated products. Poultry inspection began in 1926 on a voluntary basis, and in 1957, Congress passed the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA), which established mandatory, continuous, daily inspection of poultry products.

The 1967 Wholesome Meat Act and the 1968 Wholesome Poultry Products Act amended the FMIA and PPIA, extending Federal requirements to imported products and to state meat and poultry inspection programs. These Acts ensure uniformity in regulation of products shipped interstate, intrastate, and in foreign commerce.

The Egg Products Inspection Act of 1970 required USDA to ensure that egg products are safe, wholesome, and accurately labeled. In 1995, responsibility for egg products inspection was transferred from USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service to FSIS.

The next major change to meat and poultry inspection occurred when FSIS published the landmark Pathogen Reduction/Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP)

Systems rule on July 25, 1996. Implementation of HACCP was phased in and completed in January 2000. Under HACCP, all slaughter and processing plants are required to adopt a system of process controls to *prevent* food safety hazards.

Also, the HACCP rule clarifies the respective roles of industry and government in ensuring food safety and, therefore, makes better use of government resources in addressing food safety risks. Industry is accountable for producing safe food. Government is responsible for setting appropriate food safety standards, maintaining vigorous inspection to ensure that those standards are met, and maintaining a strong enforcement program to deal with plants that do not meet regulatory standards.

Biosecurity Activities:

In light of the events of September 11, 2001, biosecurity activities were instituted at all levels of the Federal Government, requiring tremendous coordination throughout. To understand FSIS biosecurity activities, an overview of related White House and Department-level activities is needed.

On October 8, 2001, President George W. Bush established the Office of Homeland Security. The mission of the Office is to develop and coordinate the implementation of a comprehensive national strategy to secure the United States from terrorist threats or attacks. The Office will coordinate the executive branch's efforts to detect, prepare for, prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from terrorist attacks within the United States. These efforts include working with executive departments and agencies, State and local governments, and private entities to ensure the adequacy of the national strategy.

USDA Homeland Security Council:

An internal USDA Homeland Security Council was organized to work in partnership with the Office of Homeland Security, the National Security Council, and other Departments to set a course for long-term success. The Council, chaired by James R. Moseley, Deputy Secretary, USDA, consists of members from all of the Department's program areas.

The Council is responsible for establishing overall USDA Homeland Security policy, coordinating department-wide homeland security issues, tracking USDA progress on homeland security objectives, and appointing a representative to interagency or other external groups. The Council also ensures that information, research, and resources are shared and activities are coordinated with other Federal agencies.

The USDA Homeland Security Council has three subcouncils that provide coordination between mission areas and agencies, as well as information to the Secretary and other key decision-makers. Subcouncils are comprised of a cross section of departmental representatives, including senior leaders from FSIS. The three subcouncils are:

- Protection of the Food Supply and Agriculture Production (PFSAP)
- Protecting USDA Facilities and Other Infrastructure

- Protecting USDA Staff/Emergency Preparedness

PFSAP is the only subcouncil with responsibilities for the food supply. Specific responsibilities include:

- issues dealing with food production, processing, storage, and distribution;
- threats against the agriculture sector and rapid response to such threats;
- border surveillance and protection to prevent introduction of plant and animal pests and diseases; and
- food safety activities concerning meat, poultry, and egg inspection, laboratory support, research, education and outbreaks of foodborne illness.

Other measures in place to further strengthen our food safety systems include the Food Threat Preparedness Network (PrepNet) and the FSIS Food Biosecurity Action Team (F-BAT).

PrepNet:

PrepNet functions across Federal departments to ensure effective coordination of food security efforts throughout the Government. PrepNet is co-chaired by the Administrator of FSIS and the Director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration (FDA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Other members include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), the Department of Defense (DOD), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and a State government representative. The focus of this group is on preventive activities to protect the food supply, as well as on rapid response. PrepNet members share scientific and laboratory assets. PrepNet has established 3 subgroups that will focus on: 1) emergency response, 2) laboratory capability, and 3) efforts aimed toward prevention and deterrence.

F-BAT:

Since September 11, 2001, the USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety formed the Food Biosecurity Action Team (F-BAT) to coordinate and facilitate all activities pertaining to biosecurity, countering terrorism, and emergency preparedness within FSIS. F-BAT also serves as FSIS's voice with other governmental agencies and internal and external constituents on biosecurity issues.

F-BAT is charged with 5 goals:

- Ensuring the continuation of FSIS's essential functions during emergencies;
- Ensuring FSIS employee safety pertaining to terrorism, bioterrorism, and catastrophic emergencies;

- Ensuring that FSIS is prepared to prevent and respond to agricultural terrorism or attacks on the food supply;
- Ensuring effective communication with FSIS employees, USDA, industry, trade associations, consumers, media, and Congress; and
- Ensuring the security of FSIS laboratories.

F-BAT has been instrumental in several initiatives to improve food safety and security. These include:

- assessing potential vulnerabilities along the farm-to-table continuum;
- providing guidelines to industry on food security and increased plant security, particularly in small and very small plants;
- strengthening FSIS coordination and cooperation with law enforcement agencies; and
- enhancing security features at all FSIS laboratories, and increasing the capacity of the agency's laboratories to test for additional food safety hazards and biological agents.

In conjunction with F-BAT activities, FSIS has added new veterinary medical personnel in its district offices. These individuals serve as points of contact on biosecurity issues in each office, as part of their professional responsibilities.

Additional Coordination Efforts:

FSIS coordinates its efforts with several other parties committed to preventing biosecurity threats. FSIS works closely with the CDC, FDA, and EPA, as well as with State and local health agencies, to share information about illnesses.

FSIS also participates in PulseNet, a national network of public health laboratories supported by the CDC. PulseNet performs DNA fingerprinting on foodborne bacteria and assists in the detection of foodborne illness outbreaks and traceback to their sources, including detection of a linkage among sporadic cases. PulseNet, combined with epidemiology, has been key in enabling Federal agencies to rapidly detect and control outbreaks of foodborne illness.

Consumers can also submit complaints related to meat, poultry, or egg products to the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline by calling 1-800-535-4555 or 202-720-3333. FSIS field personnel investigate and report on all consumer complaints submitted to the Hotline.

FSIS has confidence in American food producers and companies. These companies have a vested interest in making food safety a priority, and have done so for many years. FSIS has been working with industry to provide guidance on food security matters, and on communication and preparedness activities.

FSIS also has armed consumers with the tools they need to protect themselves against foodborne illness. Through continuing food safety education efforts, information on safe-handling and cooking practices has reached a large audience, providing an additional layer of protection.

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For More Information

- Media Inquiries: (202) 720-9113
- Congressional Inquiries: (202) 720-3897
- Constituent Inquiries: (202) 720-8594
- USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline: (800) 535-4555 or (202) 720-3333
- Consumer Inquiries: Call USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555. In the Washington, DC, area, call (202) 720-3333. The TTY number is 1-800-256-7072.
- FSIS Web site: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>
- USDA Web site: <http://www.usda.gov/biosecurity>