

Remarks by Dr. Adela Ramos, senior advisor to the undersecretary for food safety at USDA, for presentation to the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), July 31, 2009.

Good morning everyone.

First, I would like to congratulate AAFCO on its 100th anniversary. Your organization has long promoted laws, regulations, standards, and policies for the safe production of animal feeds — important to ensuring the safety of our food supply — and you have reached an important milestone in the history of your organization. Again, congratulations.

Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about a topic that's been recently grabbing headlines too frequently: food safety. My background is in microbiology, but my work as a staff member for the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, and now working at USDA, has helped me further develop a background in food safety policy.

Helping to protect public health gives me a sense of purpose, and being a new mom now puts food safety in perspective, with high importance.

As you know, a rash of foodborne illness outbreaks, caused by bacteria-laden spinach and hot peppers to *Salmonella*-laced peanut butter and pistachios, has fueled calls for change. Let me say that I share the same concerns many of you have when I read these stories.

USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) inspects meat, poultry and egg products. Our 6,585 inspectors are in plants everyday ensuring the safety and wholesomeness of meat, poultry, and egg products. Despite our agency's daily presence in establishments, we have figures like this: During the first six months of this year, 37 FSIS-regulated products were recalled.

More than 325,000 people in the U.S. are hospitalized each year for foodborne illnesses and countless others have problems they don't even realize are related to tainted food.

These are classic examples of why a major policy shift from reaction to prevention is well overdue. The priority on prevention and science-based food safety complements what FSIS has been promoting for the past few years.

And this is also what the Obama administration is emphasizing to address the food safety problems facing the U.S. today.

We've already seen the bold agenda put forward by the administration to help solve everyday problems faced by Americans. And food safety is most certainly on the front burner.

President Obama's actions to date speak volumes about the urgency that solving our country's most pressing food safety issues has in his administration. Within the first 90 days of taking

office, the President formed the [Food Safety Working Group](#) chaired by the secretaries of agriculture and health and human services.

The group is charged with making recommendations on what our national food safety system should look like, including the roles and responsibilities of those working within this system.

The group is committed to three core principles: prioritizing prevention, strengthening inspection and enforcement supported by strong data and analysis, and improving response and recovery.

Let's look at some of the group's goals.

Strengthening Risk Analysis and Detection. This is where we collect quality data and coordinate it with our stakeholders using modern public health databases managed through the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and state and local health authorities.

The working group is calling for an integrated state and federal electronic laboratory network to detect high-risk biological, chemical and physical hazards in less than 48 hours.

Expanding Risk-Based Inspection and Enforcement. As the term implies, we need to do a much better job of allocating our inspection resources to achieve better public health outcomes. We know there are areas where we currently over and under-inspect.

Risk-based inspections based on accurate and reliable data will be the hallmark of the entire system because they allow us to place resources and money where it does the most good.

We know we shouldn't be inspecting everything with the same frequency and intensity. We know all products are not equal in risk as we know all processes do not carry the same hazards.

Obviously, when assessing the whole food supply we can assign a risk value to each operation and make intelligent and rational decisions. Certain operations are more prone to contamination than others, so we scrutinize where the risk is greatest. It's an efficient protocol and it was recently endorsed in an independent study by the National Academy of Sciences.

Establishing Rapid Outbreak Response and Recovery. We know, that despite our best efforts, food safety systems do and will fail in the future. We must have mitigation systems in place which target and minimize harm to consumers when these systems fail. We must identify and pinpoint contamination within days — not weeks or months.

Providing Adequate Resources. Resources can mean a lot of things, but it's the ability to conduct surveys, verify testing is being done and having the technical assistance, education and training to maintain an effective food safety network.

The cost of not taking action is much higher.

The latest USDA figures show the national cost of foodborne illness is in the tens of billions of dollars per year in medical costs, lost income, productivity and other expenses.

Those other expenses include the two to three percent of foodborne cases leading to long-term illnesses, including rheumatoid and reactive arthritis, meningitis and chronic kidney disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Food Safety Working Group's first proposals were [announced](#) July 7 by Vice President Biden.

Among them: FSIS will develop new standards to reduce *Salmonella* in poultry and have 90 percent of poultry establishments meet those standards by the end of the year.

FSIS will issue [improved instructions](#) on how to verify that beef establishments are working to reduce *E. coli* O157:H7 and increase sampling to detect this pathogen, especially in ground beef.

And, for FDA oversight, [egg producers must now test](#) regularly for *Salmonella* and buy chicks from suppliers who do the same. Farmers and shippers must now keep eggs refrigerated, just as wholesalers and retailers do.

Right now, 15 federal agencies have a say in food safety while many of the bedrock laws regulating America's food supply were written when Teddy Roosevelt was in the White House.

Perhaps that's why President Obama called our food safety laws a "hazard to public health" in his March 14 weekly radio address when he announced the creation of the Food Safety Working Group.

Congress is already working on modernizing the national food safety system. Many Members of Congress have taken an active interest in developing food safety legislation. There are a lot of good efforts that promote prevention, transparency, and identification of risks. You can influence these potential new laws by making your voice heard.

But no matter where this discussion takes us, there needs to be accountability. There needs to be well defined food safety standards at all levels of our food production system with solid regulatory oversight.

This also includes the consumer. Consumers need to handle food responsibly — properly cooking meat, washing utensils that have touched raw products and washing hands — simple but crucial steps to control contamination.

FSIS manages an aggressive outreach program to educate consumers on these essentials because we understand legislation and inspection are just part of the food safety equation.

Currently, we are told that consumer confidence in the safety of the U.S. food supply has plummeted and is at an all-time low. Yet, strangely, we hear over and over, that America's food supply is the safest in the world. I think the challenge before us is to prove this to be true. Our data should speak for itself. I think with preventive systems in place we can truly stand behind this statement of safety.

On that note, I'd like to tell you about FSIS's biggest innovation, the Public Health Information System or PHIS.

PHIS is a revolutionary preventative tool that predicts outcomes before they happen. It's the system of the future.

The system pulls data from all parts of the food system — imports, establishments, restaurants, retail outlets and the dinner table when you get sick. By analyzing these points we can identify the source of pathogen outbreaks.

As information is gathered it's constantly monitored, instantly compared and assessed for patterns and anomalies that could spell trouble — anything from an overdue inspection, structural damage, or contamination at a plant, to a mislabeled product.

PHIS places violators into a three-tiered structure that provides guidelines for corrections and follow-up based on the severity of the findings.

The system will allow us to respond faster and more effectively through better coordination with managers, stakeholders and other agencies, improving investigations and contaminant tracing.

Expected to be working by the end of 2010, PHIS is being developed with guidance from the National Academy of Sciences and a committee representing business and consumer interests. The group is working to ensure decisions and policies derived through PHIS are science-based and backed up by supporting data.

So you can see, the stakes are high, but so are the goals. We know that consumers, industry, the executive and legislative branches, are all committed to taking bold steps to improve the safety of the domestic and foreign food supply.

Safe and wholesome food is everyone's responsibility and we'll all need to work together.

I want to thank you again for inviting me here today.

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