

On September 23, 2010, at the National Food Policy Conference in Washington, D.C., Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Elisabeth Hagen outlined the USDA's vision on modernizing the Department's food safety efforts on behalf of consumers.

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Introduction

Good morning. Carol [Tucker-Foreman], thanks so much for that introduction, and thank you to the Consumer Federation of America and The Grocery Manufacturer's Association for the invitation to join you all here today.

This is my first public speech as Under Secretary for Food Safety, and I couldn't be happier that it's here...with you...at this conference. Because this is a group of people who care deeply about the safety; the nutrition; the policy of food. This is a community that cares not just why, but exactly how we feed America and the world.

As consumers, as industry representatives, as policy experts and public health advocates...you care about something that many people take for granted: what goes into our food. So I'm delighted to be here and to share what USDA is going to do, under the leadership of President Obama and with the commitment of Secretary Vilsack, to ensure the safety of the food supply.

What Can We Do Better?

To me, there's no more fundamental function of government than to keep its people safe from harm. That holds true whether we're safeguarding personal rights or the public good.

And that's what's at the heart of our food safety mission at USDA-keeping Americans safe from harm. My job, and the job of more than 9,000 employees in the Food Safety and Inspection Service, or FSIS, is to protect public health through food safety. We are safeguarding the health of our people. That's a pretty powerful mandate.

Yes, a safe food supply gives our trading partners confidence in our food safety system. Yes, it contributes to a healthy, vibrant economy by supporting farmers and ranchers, food producers and processors. Make no mistake-these are real, meaningful results of the work we do in food safety. Everybody wins when food is safe, and nobody wins when it is not.

But of all the benefits of our work, none of them...none of them...are more important than the safety we bring to American tables, and to tables around the world.

And so our mission, our goal in USDA's Office of Food Safety, is protecting the health of more than 300 million Americans. We are committed to that...single...purpose.

Right now, too many people are at risk of getting sick from the food they eat. Too many mothers, or fathers, or teachers, or guardians live with the frightening possibility that the food they serve their kids might harm, and not nourish them. And if even one family has to suffer from the serious illness or loss of a loved one due to some foodborne pathogen, that's one too many.

So until we reduce that risk to zero; until we eliminate that possibility, we have more work to do at USDA. We understand this challenge. We embrace this challenge. And there isn't a day that goes by that we're not asking ourselves, that I'm not asking myself, "What can we do better?"

What can we do to ensure that the food you serve your families tonight, is safe? What can we do to improve the food safety net in a way that gives Americans the confidence they deserve in our food system?

It's critical that USDA and FDA other regulators ask these questions and work to improve the food safety system. You all know this. We know this. And the public, after news of recall after recall, knows it. President Obama has called gaps in the system unacceptable. And Secretary Vilsack has personally charged me and my team at USDA to look at any and every possible way to reduce foodborne illnesses. Nothing is off limits.

Calls for food safety reform have come from every angle-from members of Congress...to members of the media. We hear you.

We hear those concerns about holes in the federal food safety net, and whether a 21st century system can be built on century old laws. We understand that being a true public health agency means more than simply calling ourselves one. It's a cultural shift. It's about ensuring that all regulations...all policies...all actions are done in the interest of public health. We hear you, and we're evolving to meet these, and other, modern food safety challenges.

The good news for us, and for those of you in this room that care so much about food policy, is that not only are we asking what we can do better, but our President, our Secretary, and our public health partner are asking the same question. The consumer advocacy community, and the industry we regulate-are all asking the same question.

That gives us a rare opportunity to build a stronger, national food safety system. To make real gains in protecting public health. It's an opportunity to ask tough questions and look for new or improved solutions.

This Administration has a commitment to food safety that hasn't been seen in more than a decade. And I assure you that while we have this opportunity, while we have this moment; USDA is going to seize it.

In my time with you today, I'd like to talk about three areas that will be the focus of our food safety programs in the near future. First, is prevention-it has got to be the foundation of everything that we do. And it will be. Next, are the right tools to do our job-those we have and those we have to work to get. And finally, people...and why all of this matters.

Prevention

Our food safety system, the way it currently works, relies too much on reaction to problems to make people safe. At FSIS, the leadership recognized this. And for many years the agency has steadily moved toward a more proactive approach to food safety.

The agency has policies that aim to prevent contamination, and industry has been largely successful at implementing them. Together, FSIS and industry have adapted processes at establishments that make recalls the exception, and not the rule.

But the system isn't perfect; it isn't foolproof. And in our business of protecting public health, there's no room for error. Our world changes every day, and the system we had one hundred years ago wasn't meant to address emerging pathogens. It wasn't geared toward preventing foodborne infections, especially in children, the elderly, and the chronically ill.

But FSIS has evolved to become more preventative, more public health oriented...even within the constraints of the existing framework. It wasn't always this way. FSIS wasn't always a public health agency. Until 1994, USDA grouped the agency responsible for food inspection with the agencies responsible for marketing.

There was no food safety mission area. There was no one person responsible for food safety and accountable to the Secretary of Agriculture. There was no one dedicated to overseeing solely food safety and inspection programs.

But that changed in 1994. The Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act established an Under Secretary for Food Safety. And FSIS continued to evolve into what it is today: an agency that is working hard to get to a truly preventative system. One that keeps contaminated food from landing on your dinner table and-until we have that perfect system-one that is designed to protect you through additional means. Through faster recalls, through better information, through more education.

That's where we're starting our work in the Office of Food Safety. With an Administration that has an unparalleled commitment to food safety reform and an agency that's been on a steady path to protect public health. We're starting at a point where opportunity meets preparation.

And while we're at this point, with this exceptional opportunity, we have many challenges that I'm eager to tackle with the leadership of FSIS...with its more than 6300 inspectors...with the veterinarians and scientists and policy experts and food safety professionals who make up the FSIS workforce.

Some of you know these challenges:

- **Pathogens that are not addressed by our current policies.** For example, at USDA we have a zero tolerance policy for the most well-known STEC, O157. But it's 2010--we know that others can cause equally severe disease. How do we best protect consumers?
- **Traceback.** How do we get our policies for traceback to the source fully aligned with our goal of prevention? We need to pinpoint problems to respond better, faster, more effectively during outbreaks. This reduces illnesses and saves lives. But we also need a more effective traceback policy for contamination that we find through our regulatory sampling programs, if we want to have a truly preventive system.
- **Humane handling.** We're responsible for enforcing laws for humane handling of animals that enter the food supply, and we believe strongly in the importance of these laws. Yet we still struggle with inconsistency in this area.
- **Prevention and public health.** Are they the foundation of our legislative authorities, our regulations, and every administrative action that we take?
- **HACCP.** Sound, solid principles and approach. Can it be improved; given all the lessons we've learned since the USDA's groundbreaking move to implement it in 1996?

- And even measuring progress in food safety. How do we know how we're doing? What are the best indicators of our successes and failures? And are we impacting public health? Are we making a dent in the number of people who get sick?

In the first months of this Administration, President Obama established the Food Safety Working Group, which identified three core principles for our food safety system. The first and most important being prevention.

That guiding principle is the foundation of what we do at FSIS. We're continuing to move forward as a public health agency. We're fully embracing the challenge to make an impact on foodborne illnesses and deaths.

We've come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.

Tools

So how do we get there? How do we make a real impact on public health?

If our goal is to become a truly preventative system, to finish a process that was started more than fifteen years ago, we need to have the right tools in place.

One of our most powerful tools is data. We need to have the right data. We need to be able to gather the right data. And then we need to analyze it in a way that leverages our vast inspection force to protect the public.

The Public Health Information System is a tool that we are very excited about. PHIS will help us use data to make better decisions that keep food safe. We are arming our inspectors with a powerful tool, on the ground, to carry out USDA's food safety mission more effectively.

I've heard from a number of people who have questions about PHIS, who are unsure about the basis for this system. People who think PHIS will be just a change in IT, and not the change of infrastructure we've designed it to be.

I understand your concerns. But let me assure you that we're going to get this right. We're going to get this right because we can't afford not to. It will be a process, but it's part of our effort to transform our work into data driven inspection and become the truly preventive, public health agency we're striving to be.

We can't afford to do everything the same way it has always been done, and expect different results; expect improvements in foodborne illness rates. We can't do a good job with bad or inferior tools. We can't protect the health of Americans, if we can't capture what's going on-what's working and what's not-in real time, in the more than 6000 establishments we inspect, every day.

Inspectors are the key to making this system work, and we'll be working as closely, as seamlessly as possible with them, giving them any and all support they need to make it a success. It will be one tool we use to better protect public health.

And there will be others. The tools our inspectors use on the job every day; the technologies we employ in our laboratories; the relationships we have with our partners at FDA, CDC, and state health departments; the policies we have...our regulations...our authorities to ensure safe food-we're going to look at it all.

I mentioned earlier that Secretary Vilsack has charged FSIS to turn over every stone, to explore every opportunity we have to protect the health of Americans. Anything that makes us better and consumers safer is on the table.

Secretary Vilsack has given us a challenge-and an opportunity-to make real improvements in USDA's food safety program. To build on the tools we have, and look for the tools we need to protect consumers. It's a charge that I've taken very, very seriously.

People

But it takes more than a focus on prevention to make the gains that the President and Secretary demand, and that the public deserves. It takes more than having the right tools in place to do the job. It takes personal commitment.

And so the last focus area that I want to share with you, but certainly not the least, is very simple. It's people. People, are why all this matters. That's why we're here. We're doing this work in food safety to serve real people, real families, to keep Americans the healthiest they can be.

I've asked the FSIS workforce to always be mindful of that. To remember that whether they're inspecting products on the line; whether they're analyzing samples in the lab; if they're answering phones at a district office, or teaching kids about food safety, what they are really doing is protecting public health.

Every one of us is looking out for someone's child. Someone's parent. Someone's pastor, loved one, or friend. We're all responsible for the safety of food on American tables.

After all, we're consumers, too. And the Food Industry is made up of consumers. It's not just for the Consumer Federation of America, or Safe Tables Our Priority, or the Center for Science in the Public Interest that we do our work. It's for the 300 million Americans who count on us every day.

We all have a vested interest in making this work as close to perfect as possible.

As an infectious disease doctor, as a wife, as a mom to two young children, my passion for this work comes from a very personal place.

When I was practicing medicine, I took care of many patients with foodborne illness. As I was thinking about this speech, I remembered one in particular. He was an older man, a World War II veteran, who had been infected with E.coli O157:H7, and who got very sick very quickly after admission to the hospital. I remembered sitting with his wife in the Intensive Care Unit, explaining how this single celled organism could cause this disaster; how her life of nearly 60 years with him could end this way. How this big strong man, who survived D-Day, had raised 4 children and 9 grandchildren, and built his own business from the ground up; how he probably wasn't going to survive this. This... happened... because he ate contaminated food. Food; a fundamental necessity of life. I have never felt more helpless than I did in that moment.

But I don't feel helpless when I go to work every day. I don't feel helpless when I look out at this room. I feel really hopeful. And really privileged that I get to work on something that matters so much. I will continue to think about the people, the reason we do this, every day that I have the honor to serve as Under Secretary for Food Safety. I'll ask, "Are we focusing on prevention?" "Do we have the right tools?" "Are we empowering our people to do their absolute best on the job, and remembering the people we're here to protect?"

I'll ask, "What can we do better?"

This is our opportunity, our moment, to make food safety the public health priority it should be. I pledge to work as hard as I can to seize that opportunity; and to make it a success. And I hope that you'll join me.

On behalf of the 9000 employees of FSIS, I assure you that we are one team, with only one purpose. And that is to protect public health.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to working with all of you.

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