

# Inspection in the 1990's

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Good morning. It's a pleasure to be here at the 43rd Annual Reciprocal Meat Conference.

I feel comfortable with the word "reciprocal." It implies an exchange of beliefs and ideas which is fairly moderated. All sides of the issues can be equally presented, new ideas can be aired, and if a simple word called "agreement" can be added, we will all be reciprocally pleased.

Wouldn't it be enlightening if every organization with an interest in the food business understood, practiced and embraced the reciprocal process? It's surely true that we all have plenty of opportunities.

As I'm sure you are aware, the national interest about the food we eat—how it's grown, processed, and sold—is growing. Perhaps snowballing is a better word. We are not just on the food pages any more. Front-page newspaper stories and prime-time television coverage are occurring with increasing frequency.

I don't mean to imply that most press coverage has been unfair. Far from it. We've taken some heat in the past because of mistakes we made in how we involved or did not involve the public, the industry, and our employees in the inspection modernization process.

We have also made some mistakes in how we presented the issues to the public and the Congress—looking at potential savings, for example, rather than objective merits.

In fact, the increased and in-depth coverage of food policy issues is welcome. You can be sure we are looking at, listening to, and learning from those hard-hitting stories that stimulate healthy criticism, even skepticism, about how government works.

What does concern me are the easy stories that tug at the heartstrings—the stories that process, package and deliver distrust straight to the door of the world's best food marketing system.

If you can find a better way to say that Americans have the safest food supply in the world, I'd like to hear it—and tell it to the headline writers—because it's true! It's true now; it was true last year; and it was true when we were all hearing everything we wanted to know about ALAR, but were afraid to ask.

In any event, as media and general public interest in the ALAR incident reached the peak, many people, including journalists, started to take a harder look at how these frequently complicated, science-based stories were reported.

Many felt—including, I'd suspect, most of the people in this room—that the media was simply manipulated. My per-

sonal feeling is that the ALAR incident was a turning point in the coverage of food policy issues.

There is also no doubt in my mind that many of you were born with the reciprocal spirit, and can't wait to ask questions and present ideas about the science and issues of the 90's. Rest assured that I plan to honor the spirit of this conference after a few remarks are offered about FSIS plans for our seven areas of emphasis in the 1990's.

## Seven Areas of Emphasis

Our goals are summarized here. Today, I'd like to focus my remarks on point numbers 1, 2, 4, and 6:

1. The Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point System—better known as HACCP.
2. Food labeling reform.
4. Reduction of microbiological hazards.
6. Public information and consumer education.

The process of setting objectives and outlining initiatives is especially important to FSIS at this time, because we are undergoing a fundamental change from an inspection service to a science-based public health agency. There is more than just a subtle distinction here. As a public health agency, our ultimate goal is to reduce foodborne illness and promote health. Inspecting products while they are under our jurisdiction is not the end of the story.

Together, we must emphasize the importance of risk assessment and control at every step of the food production process—from production through consumption.

We are quite frankly excited about the potential of our long-range plan to generate and welcome participation from all the constituencies we serve with the goal of improving inspection.

We have placed special emphasis on seeking out and encouraging the views and suggestions of all who can contribute, on a point-by-point basis. The heart of the plan is HACCP and the soul is participation.

## HACCP

As many of you know, the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point System—or HACCP—is not new. It is a system that has proven itself over the last two decades. It is a logical, simple, but highly specialized system for controlling food safety and quality throughout the food chain, from farm to table.

HACCP regulation will work best when individuals and companies also control their own processes, using the HACCP system. In fact, the National Academy of Sciences has concluded that joint industry-government development of HACCP plans is necessary for HACCP effectiveness.

Applied to both slaughtering and processing operations,

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HACCP can prevent public health problems and other regulatory violations. The focus is on prevention, rather than just "catching" bad products at the end of the production line.

The importance and potential of prevention—the key element of HACCP—becomes vividly clear when you think about the San Francisco structures that survived the shock waves of the big earthquake and the ones that didn't.

Buildings and bridges built after careful analysis of the critical stress points were still standing after the quake. Many structures built without this kind of preventive analysis didn't make it.

HACCP means control over process, raw materials, and environment, as early in the process as possible. It also allows and encourages people to be more involved and responsible for their actions as part of the food production system.

Our goals for HACCP include consulting with interested groups about the best methods to put HACCP principles to work at improving the inspection system, making a serious effort to understand their perspectives, and involving them, wherever possible, in the decision-making process.

Last March 21st, we were happy and encouraged to receive a letter from six major industry organizations. The letter pledged support and assistance to develop and implement the HACCP system as a tool to minimize public health and safety problems.

The letter went on to say that the success of HACCP could best be assured through a "systematic approach that will allow all parties to clearly understand and accept their respective responsibilities." I couldn't agree more.

A couple of weeks ago, we announced plans to hold five public hearings this summer to discuss the incorporation of the HACCP system into meat and poultry inspection operations.

The first hearing is scheduled for a full day in Dallas this June 29th, with hearings in Philadelphia, Atlanta, Sacramento, and Evanston, Ill., to follow during this summer season.

Topics to be discussed at the hearings include the selection of specific products and processes as subjects for workshops to develop generic HACCP plans; how the workshops will be structured; the role of FSIS's special team; and how HACCP will be tested and evaluated.

The hearings will be open to the general public, industry, interest groups and professional organizations.

We know that HACCP will not happen overnight—and shouldn't be rushed. We have issued a concept paper and a strategy paper, and have begun a two-year study to determine the optimal process for implementing HACCP in meat and poultry operations.

Right now, we don't pretend to have all the answers. We have as many questions as we hope you do. We are looking to people like you in this room today, to our employees, to experts from academia, to the public, and to those who have had experience with HACCP in the past to share their knowledge and ideas with us.

## Food Labeling Reform

Another major issue facing us in the 1990's is food labeling reform. Both USDA and the Food and Drug Adminis-

tration have a vital interest in health messages on food labels. FDA has drafted a proposed rule on what sort of messages it will probably allow. USDA will be working closely with FDA to develop as complementary a policy as possible.

Two decades ago, labeling included fairly much the basics—product name, manufacturer, ingredients, weight and special handling instructions.

In the 1970's, a growing interest in nutrition stimulated many companies to include information about nutritional characteristics on product labels. And in some cases, nutritional labeling is required.

Today, consumers appear to want much more—not only nutritional information, but information about how specific foods affect health, and even more precise information about ingredients.

The growing environmental ethic has also influenced consumer demand for products that at least appear more environmentally friendly.

Not surprisingly, manufacturers want to make labeling claims for their products that are responsive to the new consumer. But so far, there is no consensus on exactly what information should be presented, or the form it should take.

To help determine the "ideal" label and the best labeling policy, FSIS and FDA have contracted with the National Academy of Sciences for a 12-month \$500,000 study.

In addition, the two agencies held public hearings last November and December in Chicago, San Antonio, Seattle and Atlanta.

Some of the issues we face are how food labels can best convey accurate information about nutrition and what is a product's contribution to total dietary requirements.

We definitely want to avoid sanctioning any program or label strategy that might confuse or mislead consumers, or label foods as good or bad. We want to enable manufacturers to provide information that will convey to consumers the importance of the total diet to good health, a concept USDA has endorsed through the years in all our nutritional programs. We are also concerned that we don't stifle innovation through heavy-handed, burdensome regulations.

## Reduction of Microbiological Hazards

Our fourth area of emphasis is the reduction of microbiological hazards. Microbiological contamination is among the greatest risks that meat, poultry and other raw foods of animal origin pose to public health. The food industry, including retailers, must recognize that it's everybody's responsibility to control natural microbial pathogens.

Nor do we expect the problem to go away. It seems that just as we manage to control one pathogen, a new one comes into focus. For instance, it's only in the last few years that *Listeria monocytogenes* has been recognized as a risk in food.

We have a three-pronged approach to attacking this problem. First, we will continue to monitor meat and poultry to see what types of problems exist.

For instance, in March, we began a new microbiological monitoring survey to compare the number of salmonella positives in 25-gram samples of raw thigh meat from chicken, turkey, pork and beef. During this two-year nationwide survey, we plan to test 1,200 samples from each species for a

total of 4,800 samples.

A second survey, started the first week in May, will quantify the number of salmonellae in whole birds. As you may know, our 1982-1984 survey showed 35.2% of broilers to be contaminated with salmonella, but did not measure the number of organisms. This information is relevant to the potential for illness if foods are abused.

In addition to keeping track of the problem, we are looking at new ways to control it. For instance, we're continuing our bacterial control project in Puerto Rico. We've made a number of changes in the plant that have been somewhat successful in reducing contamination. However, we're finding that it's very difficult to reduce product contamination only through actions in the plant.

So we have begun to concentrate on controlling contamination during the grow-out operation to see if we can reduce contamination before the birds ever reach the plant. We just completed one study where we used an organic acid feed additive; no results are back yet.

Other projects are on the horizon. For instance, we're looking at the possibility of a cooperative venture with USDA's Agricultural Research Service to study competitive exclusion.

Under the study, chicks would be fed an undefined bacterial culture that does not contain salmonella in hopes that the culture will colonize the chicks' intestines and exclude salmonella. ARS is conducting other research as well.

### **Public Information and Consumer Education**

Before I close, I want to briefly point out how strongly we feel about the need to expand and improve our public infor-

mation and consumer education efforts. FSIS has helped educate the public on food safety for more than 15 years, through the meat and poultry hotline and a variety of consumer publications. We are also reaching new audiences, such as consumers who face special risks for foodborne illness and individuals for whom English is not a native language. We recently launched our "At Risk" campaign—targeting food safety information to older persons, infants and pregnant women, and the immunocompromised.

Several years ago, we developed an educational package called "Food Safety is No Mystery" to reach food preparers involved in large-scale feeding programs—so important now that Americans eat more meals away from home.

More than 12,000 kits—including a videotape and training package—have been sold, exceeding even our own expectations. We just released the Spanish version.

Since reliable national surveys tell us that more than half of U.S. teenagers age 16 to 19 work or have worked in a restaurant facility, we are developing a new video package titled "The Danger Zone" especially produced for middle school and high school students.

The package is designed to fit with existing science, home economics and other class activities. So we are very hopeful that these young students will take a sound basic knowledge of food safety practices to work and back home with them.

In addition to teaching proper food handling principles, we also want to encourage a better understanding of the U.S. food protection system and the challenges it faces.

FSIS must provide accurate and responsible information about food safety issues and the benefits as well as the risks of moving ahead with scientific and technical advances.

I've sincerely enjoyed this opportunity to be here today, and I hope you have found my update useful.