

USDA seeks to modernise poultry inspection in the United States

In a shift that will save money for businesses and taxpayers while improving food safety, the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is proposing a modernisation of young chicken and turkey slaughter inspection in the United States by focusing FSIS inspection resources on the areas of the poultry production system that pose the greatest risk to food safety.

"The modernisation plan will protect public health, improve the efficiency of poultry inspections in the US, and reduce spending," Tom Vilsack, Agriculture Secretary, told International Meat Topics.

"The new inspection system will reduce the risk of foodborne illness by focusing FSIS inspection activities on those tasks that advance our core mission of food safety.

"By revising current procedures and removing outdated regulatory requirements that do not help combat foodborne illness, the result will be a more efficient and effective use of taxpayer dollars."

Focus on food safety tasks

Currently, some FSIS employees in poultry establishments perform several activities which are unrelated to food safety, such as identifying visual defects like bruising, while others conduct the critical inspection activities.

Under the proposed plan, all FSIS inspection activities will focus on critical food safety tasks to ensure that agency resources are tied directly to protecting public health and reducing foodborne illnesses.

Additionally, some outdated regulatory requirements are being removed and replaced with more flexible and effective testing and process control requirements.

Finally, all poultry establishments will now have to ensure that their procedures prevent contamination in the production process and provide supporting data to FSIS personnel.

By focusing inspectors only on the areas that are crucial to food safety, these changes will not only enhance

consumer safety but will improve efficiency, saving taxpayers more than \$90 million over three years and lower production costs at least \$256.6 million per year.

FSIS will continue to conduct on-line carcass-by-carcass inspection as mandated by law. This rule will allow FSIS personnel to conduct a more efficient carcass by carcass inspection with agency resources focused on more effective food safety measures. Data collected by the Agency over the past several years suggests that offline inspection activities are more effective in improving food safety. Inspection activities conducted off the evisceration line include pathogen sampling, and verifying that establishments are maintaining sanitary conditions and controlling food safety hazards at critical points in the production process.

The proposal has been posted on the FSIS website (fsis.usda.gov) and soon will publish in the Federal Register. The comment period will end 90 days after the proposal publishes in the Federal Register and must be submitted through the Federal eRulemaking Portal at www.regulations.gov, or by mail to the US Department of Agriculture.

All items submitted by mail or electronic mail must include the Agency name and docket number, which will be assigned when it is published in the Federal Register.

Over the past two years, FSIS has announced several new measures to safeguard the food supply, prevent foodborne illness, and improve consumers' knowledge about the food they eat.

Three core principles

These initiatives support the three core principles developed by the President's Food Safety Working Group: prioritising prevention; strengthening surveillance and enforcement; and improving response and recovery.

Some of these actions include:

- Performance standards for poultry establishments for continued reductions in the occurrence of

pathogens. After two years of enforcing the new standards, FSIS estimates that approximately 5,000 illnesses will be prevented each year under the new campylobacter standards, and approximately 20,000 illnesses will be prevented under the revised salmonella standards each year.

- Zero tolerance policy for six Shiga toxin-producing E. coli (STEC) serogroups. Raw ground beef, its components, and tenderised steaks found to contain E. coli O26, O103, O45, O111, O121 or O145 will be prohibited from sale to consumers.

USDA will launch a testing program to detect these dangerous pathogens and prevent them from reaching consumers.

- Test and hold policy that will significantly reduce consumer exposure to unsafe meat products, should the policy become final, because products cannot be released into commerce until the Agency test results for dangerous contaminants are known.

- Labeling requirements that provide better information to consumers about their food by requiring nutrition information for single ingredient raw meat and poultry products and ground or chopped products.

- Public Health Information System, a modernised, comprehensive database about public health trends and food safety violations at the nearly 6,100 plants FSIS regulates. ■

High levels of MRSA bacteria in retail meat products

Retail pork products in the United States have a higher prevalence of methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus bacteria (MRSA) than previously identified, according to new research by the University of Iowa College of Public Health and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

MRSA can occur in the environment and in raw meat products, and is estimated to cause around 185,000 cases of food poisoning each year. The bacteria can also cause serious, life threatening infections of the bloodstream, skin, lungs, and other organs. MRSA is resistant to a number of antibiotics.

The study, published in January 2012 in the online science journal PLoS ONE, represents the largest sampling of raw meat products for MRSA contamination to date in the US.

The researchers collected 395 raw pork samples from 36 stores in Iowa, Minnesota, and New Jersey. Of these samples, 26 (or about 7%) carried MRSA.

"This study shows that the meat we buy in our grocery stores has a higher prevalence of staphylococcus than we originally thought," Dr Tara Smith, interim director of the UI Center for Emerging and Infectious Diseases and assistant professor of epidemiology, told International Meat Topics.

"With this knowledge, we can start to recommend safer ways to handle raw meat products to make it safer for the consumer."

The study also found no significant difference in MRSA contamination between conventional pork products and those raised without antibiotics or antibiotic growth promoters.

"We were surprised to see no significant difference in antibiotic-free and conventionally produced pork," Tara, the lead study author, added.

"Though it is possible that this finding has more to do with the handling of the raw meat at the plant than the way the animals were raised, it is certainly worth exploring further."