

# SAFE FOOD COALITION

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March 5, 2014

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We, the undersigned members of the Safe Food Coalition, are writing again to express our concern about the ongoing *Salmonella* Heidelberg outbreak linked to Foster Farms and the Food Safety and Inspection Service's (FSIS) response to this serious public health threat.

In its most recent update, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said that 481 people in 25 states and Puerto Rico have been sickened with seven outbreak strains of *Salmonella* Heidelberg since March 1, 2013. Thirty-eight percent of ill persons have been hospitalized, an unusually high rate of hospitalization. The outbreak strains of *Salmonella* Heidelberg are resistant to several commonly prescribed antibiotics.

CDC indicated that "ongoing surveillance in February identified that infections from two of the previously rare outbreak strains [of *Salmonella* Heidelberg] have again exceeded the number of infections expected to be reported to PulseNet during this time of year." One strain was isolated from a retail sample purchased on January 27, 2014 and collected thru the National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System (NARMS), while the other sample was identified in a leftover sample of raw chicken from an ill person's home in California. Both of these samples were linked to Foster Farms chicken.

Based on this new information from CDC, we again raise our concerns that a recall never occurred as part of this outbreak. Instead Foster Farms was allowed to make unidentified changes to its food safety plan and continue operating. We believe FSIS should have requested that Foster Farms recall their product in the interest of public health.

We also urge FSIS to take action on the steps we identified in our previous letter from October 2013 (attached), including declaring antibiotic-resistant strains of *Salmonella* as adulterants, publishing new performance standards for poultry parts, requiring poultry plants to reassess their HACCP plans for *Salmonella*, and seeking authority from Congress for enforceable performance standards, mandatory recall and financial penalties.

We urge the agency to take these actions, as well as the others we previously outlined, to reduce the risk to consumers from contaminated poultry and to improve USDA's response to a serious public health threat.

Sincerely,

Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention  
Center for Science in the Public Interest  
Consumer Federation of America  
Consumers Union  
Food & Water Watch  
Government Accountability Project  
National Consumers League  
STOP Foodborne Illness