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Consumer Groups Call on Obama Administration to Take Action on Food Safety During First 100 Days

IOM Recommendation to Move Meat and Poultry to FDA Questioned

WASHINGTON—The Institute of Medicine today stated that the Food and Drug Administration's food safety system remains ill-equipped to meet emerging challenges and that the legal authority underlying all government inspection programs should be updated to emphasize prevention of foodborne illness. The IOM further suggested there would be benefits to creating a new focused food safety entity within the Department of Health and Human Services rather than continuing at FDA. Consumer Federation of America and the Center for Science in the Public Interest endorsed that action and today are urging President-Elect Barack Obama to act quickly to advance it.

The groups are puzzled though, that the IOM, recommended moving well-functioning U.S. Department of Agriculture programs into the dysfunctional FDA. While consumer groups and numerous members of Congress have supported consolidating all food safety functions in a single independent agency, moving meat and poultry inspection to FDA would undermine the strengths of meat and poultry inspection and overwhelm the food safety apparatus in HHS.

It is also true that Congress has consistently refused to consider moving the Food Safety and Inspection Service's inspection programs to HHS. That recommendation from the IOM is dead on arrival on Capitol Hill, and it should be, according to CSPI and CFA.

Instead, the groups urged the Obama Administration to take immediate steps to re-invigorate the federal food safety effort, reduce the risk, and restore consumer confidence in the ability of the government to assure the safety of the food supply.

The groups said that the President, within the first 100 days in office, should:

- Issue an executive order re-establishing the White House Food Safety Council to provide him an overall view of food safety needs, and direct the Council to manage strategic coordination of all food safety efforts and create a long-term budget plan for food safety agencies.

- Direct the Food Safety Council to work with Congress to establish a commission made up of government officials, industry and consumer leaders, and food

safety experts to develop a proposal to bring together the various federal food safety efforts into a single agency charged with protecting the public from food-related illnesses.

--Instruct the Secretary of Health and Human Services to combine under a single HHS official, program and budget responsibility for all HHS food safety activities. The official should be directly accountable to the Secretary and responsible for leading food safety activities at FDA, including setting preventive safety standards for all FDA-regulated foods and assuring FDA inspection activities are carried out effectively. The Secretary should also direct this official to lead the effort to establish within HHS a Food Safety Administration, consisting of the food-related activities now undertaken by the FDA, operating under a modernized food safety statute.

“These steps will go a long way toward putting our food safety regulatory system back on track,” said Chris Waldrop, Director of the Food Policy Institute at Consumer Federation of America. “This is an opportunity for the new Administration to greatly improve the safety of America’s food supply.”

“The safety of America’s food supply has suffered from malign neglect under the Bush Administration,” said Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. “Comprehensive food safety reform is the kind of change we need. The status quo, after all, is killing about 5,000 and sickening tens of million Americans a year.”

“The President cannot alone fix the organizational problems that make Americans uncertain about the safety of our food but, by acting quickly to do what he can, he will help restore confidence that government is working to address the problems, added Carol Tucker-Foreman, distinguished fellow at CFA.

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Consumer Federation of America is a non-profit association of 300 consumer groups, representing more than 50 million Americans. It was established in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through research, education and advocacy. The Food Policy Institute at CFA works to promote a safer, healthier and more affordable food supply.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest is a nonprofit health-advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., that focuses on nutrition, food safety, and pro-health alcohol policies. CSPI is supported largely by the 950,000 U.S. and Canadian subscribers to its ***Nutrition Action Healthletter*** and by foundation grants.