



## Consumer Federation of America

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### **CONSUMER FEDERATION OF AMERICA TO CONGRESS: PROTECT OUR HEALTH, DON'T DISEMBOWEL FEDERAL MEAT AND POULTRY INSPECTION**

Good morning. I'm Carol Tucker Foreman of Consumer Federation of America. I'm here to urge all Americans in joining us to demand that Congress not disembowel the federal meat and poultry inspection system.

The U.S. Congress is a threat to public health. The House of Representatives has turned back the clock on federal food safety standards. Forty years ago Congress created the federal meat inspection system because low state safety standards threatened public health. They required that no meat or poultry can be sold in interstate commerce until a federal inspector, sworn to protect public health, verifies that the product is safe, wholesome and accurately labeled. American consumers recognize and count on the safety of meat and poultry products that bear the label, "Inspected and Approved, U.S. Department of Agriculture."

The House passed Farm Bill abandons federal inspection for all but a few giant plants. It takes us back to the old days when state inspected meat could be sold anywhere in the U.S. and exported to foreign countries. It puts our health at the mercy of a multitude of state inspection programs that vary in rigor and science and ability to withstand political pressure. The Senate seems ready to follow this bad example.

Supporters claim their goal is to help small meat and poultry processing businesses and give cattle and poultry producers new markets. They argue that very small plants can't meet detailed federal inspection requirements and federal inspectors aren't sympathetic or understanding of the problems that small packers have.

They're wrong on the facts.

--Thousands of successful very small plants, located in every state in the Union, operate under federal inspection. Almost three thousand of the 5,603 federally inspected meat and poultry plants have ten or fewer employees. These plants meet federal requirements and sell anywhere they want. Why is Congress setting up a system that serves the meat companies that can't or aren't willing to meet those same standards?

--The bill goes far beyond very small plants. It permits plants with 50 or fewer employees to opt for state inspection and sell across state lines. The Farm Bill makes eighty percent of all federally inspected plants eligible to leave federal inspection and switch to state inspection. Further, it allows plants to switch from federal to state inspection and back again

every four years. The result will be an effective end to federal inspection and administrative havoc and those conditions will surely lead to more sick people and more deaths.

Their priorities are wrong too. Vigorous meat and poultry inspection is a vital public health program. Foodborne illness makes 76 million Americans sick each year, sends 325,000 Americans to the hospital and kills 5,000 of us. The members of Consumer Federation of America want all food safety inspectors to put us and our families first, not worry about whether they're being too tough on some inept meat packer. This bill sends a deadly wrong message.

State meat and poultry inspection programs do not always provide protection that is "equal to" federal health standards. USDA's Inspector General has said state inspection systems don't police safety problems in plants and FSIS doesn't police the state inspection systems. FSIS reviewers reported that state inspectors didn't close down plants where cutting boards were contaminated with meat from the previous day's work and others that weren't checking to be sure cooking temperatures were high enough to kill bacteria.

The bill says nothing about a vital public health issue--how can states protect public health when state inspected adulterated meat or poultry has left the state where it was produced? When bad meat is making people sick government must act quickly and efficiently to track it down and get it off the shelves before the toll grows higher. How can one state, with no legal authority or staff on the ground in other states, get adulterated meat or poultry off the shelf and out of home refrigerators. No one in Congress has even tried to address this vital problem.

This kind of legislation gives Congress a bad name. No one has asked or answered these hard questions. The House never held a hearing on the state inspection provisions. There was no debate on the House floor. The Senate hasn't held hearings either. They've just huddled with the special interests that demand passage.

American consumers must defend ourselves and our families. We have to step in and demand Congress not jeopardize our safety. We need to treat this bill the way USDA inspectors treat bad meat--look at it closely, test it for safety, then mark it "inspected and rejected."

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*Consumer Federation of America is a non-profit association of over 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. Carol Tucker Foreman is Distinguished Fellow, The Food Policy Institute. From 1977-81, she was USDA's Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services. Her responsibilities included meat and poultry inspection.*