



## Consumer Federation of America

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### **CFA's Carol Tucker-Foreman on Obama Administration Decision to Declare Additional *E. Coli* Strains As Adulterants**

The Obama Administration's announcement that ground beef contaminated with any of six additional disease-causing strains of *E. coli* bacteria is adulterated and must be removed from the market may be the biggest change in meat and poultry safety in the last fifteen years. It is only the second time that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has declared that the agency will consider any pathogen for which no safe level has been determined an adulterant. A federal court in Texas upheld the first use of the law in this manner. We think it is justifiable to apply the ruling to antibiotic resistant Salmonella as well.

The decision is consistent with the principles laid out by the President in his March 2009 television speech on food safety programs. He said then that there are certain things that we can't do on our own and that government must step in to address. One of those things is ensuring that the foods we eat are safe and don't cause us harm.

The USDA's program to control *E. coli* O157:H7 has been reasonably effective. The determination of adulteration, regular government testing and the threat of recall created an urgency within the industry to address the problem in order to avoid positives and the disease rate has fallen according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Last June CDC reported that *E. coli* O157:H7 illnesses had fallen to the level set in the national health objectives. In 2010 illnesses attributable to the other six *E. coli* strains USDA is now acting on caused more illnesses than O157:H7.

FSIS has laid out a reasonable approach to the new program, focusing first on the trim that is used to make ground beef and doing testing at large slaughterhouses that supply most of the trim to ground beef manufacturers. It is good public health practice to prevent adulteration at the earliest possible point in the process.

This is also the first major initiative of this Administration to improve meat and poultry safety. Focus has been on FDA and meat and poultry contamination has seemingly not been of much interest at the White House.

Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Elisabeth Hagen and her team made the case for this action and it was persuasive enough, and the program details reasonable enough, to overcome fierce industry and trading partner opposition.

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Carol L. Tucker-Foreman is the Distinguished Fellow at Consumer Federation of America's Food Policy Institute. She was the assistant secretary for food and consumer services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture from 1977-1981 where she oversaw the nation's food assistance programs and the meat, poultry and egg inspection and food grading systems. Consumer Federation of America is an association of nearly 300 non-profit consumer organizations that was established in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through research, education and advocacy.