



Consumer Federation of America

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IN MIDST OF MASSIVE MEAT RECALL, SENATE CONSIDERS DISEMBOWELING FEDERAL MEAT SAFETY STANDARDS

This week Americans in eight states are suffering with food poisoning caused by eating ground beef products adulterated with the pathogen, *E. coli* O157:H7. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is working around the clock to recover 21.7 million pounds of frozen ground beef products distributed across the country before more people are stricken.

These events should be a powerful reminder to the U.S. Congress that the first priority of meat and poultry inspection must be protecting our families and our children from foodborne pathogens. Lives depend on it.

However, while the USDA is overseeing this massive nationwide recall of adulterated ground beef, the Senate Agriculture Committee is set to follow the House of Representatives and approve a proposal to dismantle 40 years of federal food safety standards. The committee may permit up to 80% of all meat and poultry plants in the U.S. to opt out of federal safety standards and enforcement and choose instead to be inspected by their home state.

The new language would cripple recall efforts. State inspected plants could ship their products across the country and sell them abroad but state governments can't effectively recall meat and poultry that has been transported to another jurisdiction. States have no authority to act beyond their own borders, can't send staff to other states to assure meat is being removed from the shelves, don't have resources to warn consumers nationwide and don't have authority to seize and detain adulterated products. USDA can and is doing all those things right now to reduce the number of people who suffer from the adulterated meat in the Topps recall.

Congress seems to think marketing is more important than public health. Supporters of the pending legislation want to increase the number and enlarge the sales of very small meat and poultry plants. They argue that very small plants can't comply with detailed federal inspection requirements and that federal inspectors aren't sympathetic to the problems of small meat packers. However, over half of the USDA inspected plants have ten or fewer employees. Almost 3,000 very small plants already comply with federal regulations and are authorized to sell their meat anywhere.

Moreover, the proposed language goes far beyond encouraging the creation of new very small plants and undermines the current federal safety system. Eighty percent of all plants now under federal inspection would be eligible to switch to state inspection.

Members of Consumer Federation of American 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 legislation says the reverse, that safety comes second.

USDA's Inspector General says state inspection programs are not always "equal to" federal inspection. She issued a report last year detailing stomach wrenching examples of bad sanitation in state inspected plants. These included plants in Mississippi where there was soot-like material covering swine carcasses in coolers and meat residues from previous days' operations left on grinding equipment. Despite these violations, neither the Mississippi inspection program nor the federal government required the state plant to offer a plan to correct the problems. USDA approved Mississippi's program as "equal to" federal standards.

USDA's inspection system fails too often to prevent adulterated meat from getting into the food supply, but USDA can take fast, effective action to get the products off the market and out of home refrigerators before more people get sick. It could act even faster if Congress granted the department authority to require a company to recall food. Still, USDA is far more effective than any single state could be. During House consideration of the state inspection legislation, the USDA urged the Agriculture Committee to consider the problems states would have in tracing and recovering adulterated product but the House bowed to lobbying efforts by state departments of agriculture who seek to expand their powers.

American consumers must defend ourselves and our families against the special interests that want to dismantle federal food safety protection. We have to insist 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 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 at CFA's Food Policy Institute. From 1977-81 she was USDA's assistant secretary for food and consumer services.