



Consumer Federation of America

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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October 1, 2007

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Massive Federal Recall Demonstrates Need to Strengthen, Not Dismantle Federal Food Safety System

Twenty-five *E. coli* O157:H7 illnesses in eight states and the recall of 21.7 million pounds of frozen ground beef products are powerful reminders that the federal meat and poultry inspection system must be strengthened and not dismantled in favor of state by state regulation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is currently overseeing the massive nationwide recall.

This is the most recent of a series of large recalls of beef products adulterated with *E. coli* O157:H7 that have occurred this year. The recalls refute the Bush Administration's claims that the USDA and the meat industry have come close to eliminating *E. coli* O157:H7 illnesses associated with meat products.

While the USDA is overseeing a massive nationwide recall, the Senate Agriculture Committee is set to approve a bill, already passed by the House of Representatives, which would vastly complicate future recalls by permitting up to 80% of all meat and poultry plants in the U.S. to choose to be inspected by state governments rather than USDA.

The state inspected companies could ship their products in interstate commerce and sell them abroad. Since a state's authority is limited to its own borders, an effective national recall of the type now underway would be impossible. During the 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.

Recalls are voluntary. Congress has declined to change the law to give either USDA or state governments the authority to require a company to recall adulterated products.

For several years the Bush Administration has insisted that beef industry efforts and USDA regulation have made *E. coli* recalls a thing of the past. In testimony before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Under Secretary for Food Safety Richard Raymond emphasized that:

“The results are even more dramatic for sampling for *E. coli* O157:H7 in ground beef. Since CY 2000, positive samples have declined by 80 percent. Only 0.17 percent of FSIS' samples were positive in CY 2006, down from 0.86 percent in CY 2000.

“We’re also seeing dramatic declines in the rate of human illness from pathogens commonly transmitted through food. Using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) most recent statistics and comparing human illness data from 2005 with 1998 data, *E. coli* O157:H7 illness rates are down 29 percent...”

Last April the CDC reported that its FoodNet data showed that *E. coli* O157:H7 illnesses increased in 2006 and that the overall rate of illnesses has remained stable over the past decade. The Topps recall is further proof that a major revision of food safety laws, including the Meat Inspection Act, is needed to protect the public.

The Topps meat recall illustrates the problems inherent in allowing state inspected meat to be sold in interstate commerce. Topps Meat Company distributed their products across the country. Because Topps is a federally inspected plant, the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is responsible for assuring that the recall is conducted appropriately and that recalled meat is removed from store shelves across the country. FSIS has the resources and personnel to travel to the numerous states in which the meat was sold to verify the effectiveness of this recall. The agency also has the ability to warn consumers across the country of the recall.

The USDA’s Office of Inspector General has demonstrated that many state inspection systems are not equal to the federal inspection system and some are inferior. Last year, the OIG reported that FSIS permitted state inspection programs that failed the “equal to” standard to continue operating. In 2003-2005 FSIS found that half of the states it reviewed ran programs that were not “equal to” federal laws and regulations. FSIS did not shut down the state programs. In addition, OIG noted that FSIS found that state inspection programs had allowed plants with serious public health violations to continue selling meat to the public.

Earlier this year, the Government Accountability Office placed the U.S. food safety system on its high risk list and urged that much more be done to strengthen our federal food safety system to assure the safety of our food supply. Congress is going in the opposite direction, permitting states to take over much of the responsibility for meat inspection and refusing to give USDA or FDA mandatory recall authority which would speed efforts to get adulterated meat off the market.

Consumers should check their refrigerators and freezers for any products implicated in the Topps meat recall and return them to the store of purchase. The list of recalled products can be found at FSIS’ website: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/040_2007_Expanded_Recall.pdf.

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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.