



Consumer Federation of America

April 13, 2015

Docket Clerk
U. S. Department of Agriculture
Food Safety and Inspection Service
1400 Independence Avenue
Mailstop 3782, 8-163B
Washington, DC 20250-3700

RE: Establishment-Specific Data Release Strategic Plan [Docket No. FSIS-2014-0032]

Consumer Federation of America (CFA) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Food Safety and Inspection Service's notice regarding the agency's strategic plan for releasing establishment-specific data [Docket No. FSIS-2014-0032]. CFA is a nonprofit association of 280 consumer groups that was established in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through research, education and advocacy.

CFA strongly supports FSIS' decision to publish establishment-specific data. This is an important effort in providing greater transparency to the agency's work. This data has been collected using public resources; consequently the public has a right to this information. Release of this data may provide incentives to companies to enhance their food safety performance. Further, releasing this data could spur additional research and analysis by stakeholders that could lead to improvements in public health.

FSIS has sought input into this decision at multiple stages in the development of this policy. At each stage, outside experts affirmed the utility of publishing establishment-specific data. In 2011, the National Research Council concluded that there were strong arguments supporting the public release of establishment-specific data and that FSIS should develop an information-disclosure strategy to maximize the effectiveness of the data release.¹ In 2014, the National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection supported FSIS' intention to post establishment-specific data and recommend the agency prioritize its data releases and regularly evaluate the process and use of the published datasets.²

FSIS has outlined multiple criteria to evaluate potential datasets for public release. As FSIS evaluates each dataset, the agency should always lean towards publishing the datasets in the interest of public health. This is particularly true for datasets that the agency already publishes in aggregate form or for data that is already eligible for release through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. But even for other datasets, there is likely a more compelling public health reason to publish the data than there is to not release it. CFA supports FSIS' intention to publish a data dictionary and user guide for data use,

¹ National Research Council, "The Potential Consequences of Public Release of Food Safety and Inspection Service Establishment-Specific Data." *The National Academies Press*, 2011.

² National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection, Subcommittee on FSIS Establishment-Specific Data Release Strategic Plan, "Report and Recommendations." January 7-8, 2014.

interpretation and limitations for each dataset. This will provide users with the necessary context within which to analyze the data.

CFA agrees with FSIS' preliminary list of datasets for public release. In addition, FSIS should release inspection and enforcement data such as regulations verified and compliance status for each verified regulation; whether Food Safety Assessments are performed and why; humane handling data; and import sampling task data. FSIS should make every effort to release a new dataset on a regular basis (each quarter) so that releasing datasets becomes routine practice.

CFA agrees that measuring the effectiveness of data release is important but that doing so is challenging. As the National Research Council noted, we do not have a sophisticated enough data system to directly measure the public health impact of any particular activity or intervention. As such, FSIS must be careful in its evaluation and remember that transparency itself provides a strong rationale for release of this data. Specifically, CFA notes that the number of visits to websites to review or download FSIS datasets will change over time. This could occur as stakeholders become more aware that the agency is posting datasets, or it might be in response to datasets of particular interest. FSIS should also recognize the value of maintaining datasets on the web so that researchers could go back to look at data over time.

CFA questions the use of the metric regarding the number of presentations at professional meetings by FSIS staff on related data. This metric would have to be necessarily broad as FSIS officials may not present on specific datasets, but they may use the data as a portion of their presentation on other topics. CFA also questions the use of the metric regarding the number of peer-reviewed reports. While some researchers may, in fact, generate peer-reviewed papers using establishment-specific data, not all papers that use the data may be peer-reviewed. Other stakeholders may use establishment-specific data as part of white papers or other analyses that are not formally peer-reviewed. Moreover, tracking all reports and papers that use FSIS establishment-specific data may prove too cumbersome for the agency.

CFA strongly supports FSIS' determination to publish establishment-specific data. Publishing this data will undoubtedly have important public health benefits and spur useful analyses by outside stakeholders. We encourage FSIS to continue engaging with stakeholders as the agency regularly reviews and improves the process for posting establishment-specific data.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Waldrop". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Chris Waldrop
Director, Food Policy Institute
Consumer Federation of America