

# SAFE FOOD COALITION

1620 I Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20006 202-797-8551

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## **House Republicans Cut Meat Safety Program, Urge USDA to Allow Meat/Poultry Companies to Determine Whether Their Own Products are Safe**

Foodborne Illness Caused by *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *E. coli* O157:H7 May Increase

The FY 2012 appropriations bill promoted by the House Republican majority proposes to cut funding for the nation's meat and poultry inspection program for the second year in a row. Major reductions in this essential public health program and shifting responsibility for overseeing safety of food from USDA inspectors to company employees are likely to increase the risk that more Americans will get sick from consuming contaminated meat and poultry products.

The proposal approved by the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee reduces funding for the Food Safety and Inspection Service by \$35 million below the FY 2011 funding level. The final FY 2011 appropriation was \$11.2 million below that approved in FY 2010. The total amount of meat and poultry produced in the U.S. and subject to inspection increased in 2010 and will increase again in 2011.

The Republican plan also urges the FSIS to achieve savings by resurrecting and expanding a highly controversial and unproven inspection program that the Government Accountability Office has harshly criticized.

The House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee plan urges the FSIS to implement the so-called HACCP-Based Inspection Models Project (HIMP) that puts meat and poultry plant employees rather than USDA meat inspectors in charge of assuring slaughtered birds and animals are not contaminated with feces or other filth<sup>1</sup>. In 2001 the GAO criticized HIMP saying the data were gathered only at plants that had volunteered to participate, did not represent a cross-section of all plants by size or location, and ignored seasonal variations in contamination levels<sup>2</sup>. After the GAO report on the weaknesses in HIMP, the Bush Administration dropped efforts to force it on the public.

Today, there is greater evidence that poultry is a threat to human health. A recent study by the University of Florida's Emerging Pathogens Institute found that four of the top five riskiest pathogen-food combinations involved meat and poultry products. *Campylobacter* in poultry was ranked number one in terms of the highest annual disease burden in the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> According to FSIS' website, there are currently 20 chicken broiler slaughter facilities, two young turkey slaughter facilities and five market hog slaughter facilities participating in HIMP. The number of FSIS inspectors in a HIMP plant is approximately one-third of what is found in conventional slaughter facilities.

<sup>2</sup> Government Accountability Office, "Food Safety: Weaknesses in Meat and Poultry Inspection Pilot Should Be Addressed Before Implementation." GAO-02-59, December 17, 2001, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d0259.pdf>

Consumer groups oppose both cuts to the agency's budget and the proposal to expand HIMP because both actions put consumers at greater risk of foodborne illness.

Key Facts about HIMP:

1. There has not been a thorough independent analysis of HIMP in nearly ten years, since the Government Accountability Office reviewed the project in 2001. In that report, GAO strongly criticized HIMP and was skeptical that information gathered from HIMP would provide any indication at all of how chicken plants' inspection systems would perform if HIMP was adopted nationwide. GAO further emphasized that plants participating in HIMP were doing so on a voluntary basis and therefore may not be an adequate representation of the larger population of chicken slaughter plants in the U.S.
2. FSIS cannot provide assurance that expanding HIMP will not cause more foodborne illness. FSIS collected data from HIMP plants on *Salmonella* and generic *E. coli*, but collected no data on *Campylobacter*, one of the most common causes of diarrheal illness in the U.S., and most commonly associated with poultry. A recent report by the University of Florida's Emerging Pathogens Institute found that *Campylobacter* in poultry was ranked the number one pathogen-food combination in terms of the highest annual disease burden in the U.S. In addition, FSIS' testing data on *Salmonella* in HIMP plants does not demonstrate a clear benefit. Of the 20 HIMP broiler plants in the program in 2007, FSIS testing data show that eight plants had a much higher *Salmonella* rate than when they first entered the program while only five plants had a much lower *Salmonella* rate than when they first entered the program. Furthermore, line speeds in HIMP broiler facilities run an average of 200 birds per minute with only one FSIS inspector, compared to a maximum of 40 birds per minute *for each inspector* in a standard broiler plant. Faster line speeds reduce an inspector's ability to assess birds for problems and reduce employees' ability to safely process the birds.
3. FSIS recently announced new performance standards for reducing *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in poultry. There is no data showing HIMP plants can meet these new performance standards.
4. The Republican appropriations bill indicates that expanding HIMP will save FSIS money. However, FSIS has repeatedly asserted that HIMP is not intended to cut inspection costs and the data do not support that claim. Furthermore, there has been no consideration of the costs to consumers in terms of potential increases in foodborne illness and the costs to workers in terms of injuries as a result of increased line speeds.

**Congress should reject efforts to expand HIMP and should protect funding for the Food Safety and Inspection Service.**