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USDA/FSIS Hearing Clerk
300 12th Street, SW
Room 102 Cotton Annex
Washington, DC 20250-3700
Re: Docket No. 98-045N

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September 15, 1999

To Whom It May Concern:

Food safety hazards first and foremost need to be addressed at the source, with mandatory safeguards at the animal production stage. These include more humane and hygienic treatment and conditions for farm animals. Short of this, any food safety plan is doomed to fail. Regulatory authority at the production stage must be expanded, with adequate funding actively sought.

The treatment and conditions by which farm animals suffer, as a result of current practices, are highly unacceptable and include overcrowding, subjecting them to stressful procedures and conditions, feeding them chicken litter and feces, rendering diseased animals into animal feed, excessive use of antibiotics and other drugs, and inhumane and unhygienic transport and slaughter. All of these issues must be addressed and real solutions must be developed and instituted to rectify these conditions.

At this time, I would like to include the following letter that I have previously sent to President Clinton as part of my comments for the record:

I have written at this time to **express my outrage and extreme disappointment relating to the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) blatant lack of enforcement of humane slaughter, worker safety, and environmental safety as they relate to the operation and conditions at our nation's slaughterhouses, <u>and</u> how these egregious acts have not only continued, but have become even more rampant under your administration**.

Upon discovering the abysmal practices that have taken place and continue to take place at our nation's slaughterhouses, as a result of my thorough review of Gail A. Eisnitz' book – "Slaughterhouse" – in which she provides an avalanche of documentation of the completely unacceptable conditions at a multitude of slaughterhouses, including poultry, cattle, hogs, lambs, and horses, I deemed it a necessity to voice my opinion on this issue, as I find it impossible to contain my outrage without doing so.

I have come to the conclusion that the USDA's current control over the nation's slaughterhouses amounts to a **backwards operation in which all of the necessary measures have been put into place *<u>to prevent enforcement of the Humane Slaughter Act</u>*, as well as to uphold the unacceptable status quo regarding worker and environmental safety.**

The USDA is committing fraud when it assures that foreign exports of meat products, such as poultry to Canada, has been processed in accordance with the

Humane Slaughter Act (HAS). Additionally, the USDA is committing fraud as Americans are consuming meat that they believe has been slaughtered in compliance with the HSA.

The so-called Streamlined Inspection program, instituted in the early 1980's and continues to this day for poultry, is an utter disaster. Until the early 1980's, USDA inspectors not only carefully examined each bird for a long list of diseases and condemned those with pathological conditions; they were also responsible for ensuring the removal of contaminants like feces and partially digested food. Trimmable conditions that didn't affect the entire carcass, such as broken legs, bruises, blisters, scabs, and sores, had to be cut away. When such defects were found on a bird, the inspector pointed them out to a plant worker, oversaw their removal, then reinspected the finished product to make sure it complied with stringent inspection standards.

Then along came Streamlined Inspection. By 1985, Streamlined Inspection was implemented in poultry plants nationwide. Result – 450 fewer USDA poultry inspectors were examining a billion and a half more birds than ten years earlier. Inspecting thirty-five birds per minute – fifteen thousand per day, giving them roughly one and a half seconds to examine each bird inside and out for twelve different diseases and a host of abnormalities. An impossible task with predictable results. To give the appearance of federal oversight, inspectors were granted the authority to sample birds at the end of the line. They were permitted to sample ten birds per fifteen thousand slaughtered, less than one tenth of 1 percent, hardly a statistically valid sample. Streamlined Inspection is still in affect today in poultry processing plants. In a letter to the past Secretary of Agriculture, Clayton Yeutter, inspectors wrote – "the inspections we perform are toothless. Under Streamlined Inspection, we are restricted from completing comprehensive inspections, so it is impossible to be sure that contaminated, unwholesome product has not left the plant.... Instead of providing us support, our supervisors impose sanctions on us when we do our jobs."

While the USDA officially reports that 20 percent of all raw chickens are tainted with salmonella, USDA studies from the late 1980's until the present prove otherwise. USDA studies conducted in 1992 at five plants in the Southeast found salmonella contamination levels averaging 58 percent before chickens went into the chill tank, and 72 percent after this communal batch. "By immersing clean, healthy birds in the same tank with dirty ones, you're practically assuring cross-contamination. Chickens that bathe together get contaminated together."

Another bacterium called Campylobacter, has a relatively high occurrence in young adults and is now the number-one cause of gastroenteritis in the United States, causing hundreds of deaths each year. In 1991, a USDA microbiologist and leading authority on Campylobacter found the bacterium present in 98 percent of store-bought chickens.

E. coli 0157:H7, a once-rare bacterium that wasn't even identified until 1982, has since left a trail of sickness and death across the United States. Pathogens like E.coli 0157:H7 and salmonella contaminate meat during sloppy high-speed slaughter and processing operations, which is the standard practice of today.

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In 1993, the **Center for Disease Control (CDC) recorded twenty-one major outbreaks of E. coli 0157:H7 – *more than the combined total of outbreaks reported in the bacterium's entire eleven-year history***. In 1994 and 1995, a total of sixty-five U.S. outbreaks were reported to the CDC. In 1997, in just one of many outbreaks, Hudson Foods meat-processing plant in Nebraska was forced to recall 25 million pounds of potentially contaminated ground beef – the biggest meat recall in history – as a result of E. coli 0157:H7 infection.

According to the legal director of the Government Accountability Project (GAP), "the primary advice USDA offered in response to the well-known Jack-in-the-Box tragedy was that consumers are proceeding at their own risk if they eat rare or medium beef. Twenty years ago, it wasn't a reckless, foolhardy act for a family to eat medium-rare hamburgers or steak. Something has drastically changed if the USDA is warning people that federally approved beef has to be cooked to a crisp in order to avoid food poisoning tragedies. So what's changed? Obviously, the meat's a lot dirtier."

Your Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) inspection program is not only completely flawed, but makes a desperate situation even worse. The actual impact of the new regulation was a Trojan horse for deregulation of an industry that is not only completely out of control, but one that exhibits an arrogant and blatant disregard for animal suffering, worker safety, and food safety. A core component of the HACCP inspection program is that of microbial testing, which, on the surface, may seem good, but in reality is completely misleading. "The purpose of this testing is not to eliminate dangerous bacteria, but to keep contamination from exceeding what the industry decides are average levels. In broiler chickens, for example, that equates to salmonella contamination in one in five birds; for turkeys, salmonella can be present in one out of every two." Hardly a bacterial control program. Secretary Daniel Glickman's actions to use HACCP to replace inspectors on the line is a blatant violation of the Federal Meat Inspection Act.

In Australia, where a similar HACCP system has eliminated government inspection, the media has reported a dramatic increase in food-poisoning outbreaks and microbial contamination in domestic beef that is as much as **sixty times higher** than that for government-inspected exports.

"Just how committed are USDA officials to identifying critical control points and preventing potential contamination before it occurs if, as late as 1997, the fifteen member nations of the European Union (EU) decided it was necessary to institute a ban on the importation of all U.S. poultry? The grounds? Expedient U.S. slaughter methods and reliance on **"decontamination" *after* contamination** has been allowed to occur, which "compromises hygiene" and poses a serious threat to European consumers. If the burden of control is placed on a single preventive measure – such as treating a contaminated product with chlorine to remove bacteria," stated EU officials, "a significant risk remains that the treatment will be ineffective and the consumer will be exposed to a dangerous product." "Good hygiene practices must be followed through the production process, just as a chef works in a hygienic way from the beginning to end and ***does not rely on cooking to make the food safe."*** **Here in the United States, our government is telling us just the opposite*: to cook our meat thoroughly in the <u>attempt</u> to make it safe***.

Within and associated with the USDA are multiple conflicts of interest. Examples of these include:
JoAnn Smith, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture - a position which the *Kansas City Star* has referred to as "a textbook conflict of interest case."
Dr. H. Russell Cross, chosen by JoAnn Smith to head the USDA's meat inspection program, thoroughly supports the objective of deregulating the inspection program.
Don Tyson, the senior chairman of the board of Tyson Foods of Arkansas – the world's largest poultry processor and one of the nation's leading seafood and pork producers, as well as James B. Blair, Tyson's chief attorney, both of whom have close ties to the White House. **As a result of these conflicts of interest, the industry is virtually running the USDA, instead of vice-versa.**

Often times processing animals while they are still alive.
Animals completely or partially frozen as a result of transport in open trailers to slaughterhouse facilities

As far as worker safety is concerned, information from the Bureau of Labor indicates that with nearly thirty-six injuries or illnesses for every hundred workers, **meatpacking is the most dangerous industry in the United States**. In fact, a worker's chances of suffering an injury or an illness in a meat plant are **six times greater than if that same person worked in a coal mine**. Additionally, as line speeds (the speed animals are processed) have as much as tripled in the last fifteen years, **cumulative trauma disorders have increased nearly 1,000 percent**.

"Due to oppressive conditions, turnover rates in many plants soar. After quitting, thousands of legal and illegal workers recruited from pockets of unemployment end up looking to slaughterhouse communities to pick up the social costs associated with their joblessness and resulting crime. Disabled workers find it impossible to ever work again. Drained of their usefulness to the slaughterhouse, they're cast aside, reminders of **a system that places nearly as little value on human life as it does on animal life**.

According to the USDA, in 1980, it took the country's 50 largest beef packing companies and 103 individual plants to slaughter two-thirds of the nation's cattle. By 1992, **three** firms were already slaughtering that percentage of animals in just 29 plants. In 1996, more than 40 percent of the nation's cattle were killed in a mere 11 plants that slaughter more than one million animals each year. Similarly, more than 40 percent of the nation's hogs were killed in 10 plants.

Also according to the USDA, between 1984 and 1994, a few large, high-speed slaughter operations had driven roughly 2,000 small to mid-sized packers - one-third of all packers in the United States - out of business.

I demand the following:

1. a thorough restructuring of the inspection programs,
2. true enforcement of the Humane Slaughter Act,
3. expansion of the Humane Slaughter Act to cover poultry,

4. significant improvements to and true and accountable enforcement of worker safety programs,
5. significant improvements to and true and accountable enforcement of environmental protection programs,
6. elimination of all possible points of conflicts of interest by, for example, turning control of all inspection and enforcement measures back to the federal government and away from the operators of such facilities, and
7. laws to encourage the resurrection of much smaller, family-owned slaughterhouse operations, as well as laws to break up the existing mega-slaughterhouse operations, run by just a few corporations are a must.

You must put an end to a situation which places the lives of countless millions in danger everyday, especially our children and elderly, who may suffer horrible deaths or excruciating battles for survival, as well as put an end to the needless torture and suffering of the animals that are processed in these facilities, and the horrible conditions under which the employees of such facilities must work.

Each day I fear that my 3-year-old son may suffer from the effects of "USDA approved" foodstuffs.

Sincerely,

David A. Brunetti
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