

## A HEALTHIER AMERICA: 10 TOP PRIORITIES FOR PREVENTION

# Safeguarding the Nation's Food Supply

### WHY ARE FOODBORNE ILLNESSES A THREAT TO OUR NATION'S HEALTH?

#### Major Cause of Sickness and Death:

- Approximately 76 million cases of foodborne diseases occur in the U.S. each year, leading to an estimated 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths.<sup>2</sup> Virtually all of these illnesses could be prevented if the right measures are taken to improve the U.S. food safety system.
- More than 200 known diseases are transmitted through food, many through improper food handling techniques.<sup>3</sup>
- One outbreak of *E. coli* contamination in spinach in 2006 caused more than 200 known illnesses and at least 3 deaths. Officials believe for every *E. coli* case reported, 20 go unreported.<sup>4,5</sup>

#### Agriculture and Food Production Are Essential to the Economy:

- Agriculture represents one-sixth of the Gross Domestic Product at more than \$1 trillion a year and accounts for over \$50 billion in exports annually, the largest positive contribution to the national trade balance.<sup>6</sup>
- Agriculture and the food sector employ one out of every 7 U.S. workers, more than any other single industry.<sup>7</sup>
- Over 13 percent of all jobs in metropolitan areas are tied to agriculture and the food sector.<sup>8</sup>
- Plant diseases alone currently cost the U.S. economy an estimated \$33 billion a year.<sup>9</sup>
- If a significant outbreak of mad cow disease in the United States occurred, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) estimates that there would be a loss of \$15 billion, resulting from a 24 percent decline in domestic beef sales and an 80

percent decline in beef and live cattle exports.<sup>10</sup> Slaughter and disposal costs of at-risk cattle could add up to an additional \$12 billion.<sup>11</sup>

#### Outdated Regulation and Poor Coordination Leave U.S. Food Supply Vulnerable:

- Studies from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the Institute of Medicine (IOM), and the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) have all raised serious concerns about the system that is responsible for keeping the country's food safe.<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>
- None of the agencies with the largest roles in food safety oversight has ultimate authority or responsibility, and no agency takes an integrated, holistic approach to ensuring food safety.
  - ▲ As one example: FDA regulates frozen cheese pizzas, but if the pizza is topped with cooked meat or poultry, it is regulated by USDA.<sup>15</sup> Inspections at pizza production facilities must follow 2 sets of guidelines, one issued from FDA and one from USDA. USDA already inspects plants making pepperoni pizza every day, after it has already inspected the manufacture of the pepperoni on a daily basis and the slaughter of every animal used to make the pepperoni.
- FDA is responsible for 80 percent of food safety oversight, but two-thirds of the food safety budget goes to USDA.<sup>16</sup> CDC estimates that 85 percent of cases of illness reported for which there is a known food source were associated with FDA-regulated food products.
- The FDA's main food safety statutes date back to 1938 or earlier.

“OUR FRAGMENTED FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM HAS RESULTED IN INCONSISTENT OVERSIGHT, INEFFECTIVE COORDINATION, AND INEFFICIENT USE OF RESOURCES. WITH 15 AGENCIES COLLECTIVELY ADMINISTERING AT LEAST 30 LAWS RELATED TO FOOD SAFETY, THE PATCHWORK NATURE OF THE FEDERAL FOOD SAFETY OVERSIGHT SYSTEM CALLS INTO QUESTION WHETHER THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CAN MORE EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY PROTECT OUR NATION'S FOOD SUPPLY.”<sup>1</sup>

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GOVERNMENT  
ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE  
LISTING FOOD SAFETY AS  
ONE OF THE FEDERAL GOV-  
ERNMENT'S "HIGH RISK"  
PROGRAMS

**MARCH 2008**

**PREVENTING EPIDEMICS.  
PROTECTING PEOPLE.**



## HOW CAN WE KEEP OUR FOOD SUPPLY SAFER?

### ■ **Unify Government Food Safety Agencies.**

Legislation should be passed to bring existing food safety agencies together into a single, unified food safety agency to carry out a prevention-focused, integrated food safety strategy.

### ■ **Develop a Prevention- and Risk-Based Strategy.**

Policies and resources should be reevaluated to set priorities based on understanding where the highest and most likely risks are in the food safety sys-

tem, and then devoting resources to reduce and eliminate threats as much as possible, where inspections and other efforts are applied in ways most likely to contribute to disease reduction.

### ■ **Improve Federal-State-Local Efforts.**

States should adopt the FDA's Food Code that sets forth up-to-date, scientifically sound practices and enroll in the FDA's Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program for more uniform and accountable practices

## ENDNOTES

1 L. Shames. *Federal Oversight of Food Safety: High-Risk Designation Can Bring Attention to Limitations in the Government's Food Recall Programs*. Testimony of Lisa Shames, Acting Director Natural Resources and Environment, Government Accountability Office before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07785t.pdf>.

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3 Ibid.

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5 A. Shin. "E. Coli Detected Near Spinach." *Washington Post*, October 13, 2006.

6 H. Parker. *Agricultural Bioterrorism: A Federal Strategy to Meet the Threat: McNair Paper 65*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2002.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 D. Pimentel, et al. "Environmental and Economic Costs Associated with Non-indigenous Species in the United States." *BioScience* 50, no. 1, (2000):53-65.

10 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2001*. Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2001.

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12 National Academy of Sciences. *Addressing Foodborne Threats to Health: Policies, Practices, and Global Coordination, Workshop Summary*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2006.

13 Committee to Ensure Safe Food from Production to Consumption, Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. *Ensuring Safe Food: From Production to Consumption*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998.

14 Government Accountability Office. *Food Safety: USDA and FDA Need to Better Ensure Prompt and Complete Recalls of Potentially Unsafe Food*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004.

15 Committee to Ensure Safe Food from Production to Consumption, Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. *Ensuring Safe Food: From Production to Consumption*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998.

16 M. Taylor. *Improving Food Safety, Noontime Seminar at the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Policy*. Washington, D.C.: September 24, 2007.

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OR CONTACT TRUST FOR

AMERICA'S HEALTH DIRECTOR

OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

RICHARD HAMBURG,

[RHAMBURG@TFAH.ORG](mailto:RHAMBURG@TFAH.ORG)

OR 202-223-9870 x 18



1730 M Street NW • Suite 900  
Washington, DC 20036

(t) 202-223-9870

(f) 202-223-9871

[www.healthyamericans.org](http://www.healthyamericans.org)