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FSIS Releases Guidance for Food Defense Plans

Since 9/11, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has steadily increased its efforts to prevent both unintentional and intentional contamination of foods under its regulatory control. Vulnerability assessments revealed the importance of food processing establishments operating with a food defense plan specific to their operations to help prevent intentional contamination. FSIS has encouraged industry's voluntary adoption of food defense plans and has provided the tools, guidance, and outreach to assist in the effort. Last May, FSIS conducted an assessment to determine the status of each establishment's food defense plan. FSIS inspection personnel assessed 97% of 5315 meat and poultry plants, and overall, the survey revealed that participation by plants in the voluntary adoption of food defense plans has been sparse thus far. Only 27% of plants were able to produce a copy of their food defense plan for inspectors to review, and only 7% of plants indicated that they had a plan but were unwilling to share it with inspectors. Of the 1435 plants that had a defense plan in place, most had addressed the most vulnerable areas of production: 67% had security procedures to prevent intentional product contamination in water systems; 86% had security procedures in place to prevent intentional product contamination of raw materials; 82% had security procedures to prevent intentional product contamination in production processing areas; 85% had security procedures to prevent intentional product contamination in loading docks/shipping; and 82% had security procedures to prevent intentional product contamination in storage areas. FSIS intends to perform this assessment again in May 2007 and has set a goal increasing the number of plants that have functional plans to at least 50 percent. To assist plants in this endeavor, FSIS has posted on its website a guide for developing a food defense plan for meat and poultry slaughter processing plants. This guide was developed in consultation with very small, small and large meat and poultry processors and provides an easy, practical and achievable three-step method for creating a food defense plan. The guide can be viewed at www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Food_Defense_Plan.pdf. Although having a food defense plan in place is not currently required by regulation, it is vitally important that establishments of all sizes take this issue seriously. FSIS has clearly indicated that it will move toward rulemaking if the industry does not achieve a high level of voluntary compliance.

New Legislation Would Make Downer Ban Permanent

On January 25, U.S. Representative Gary Ackerman (D-NY), along with 74 original co-sponsors, introduced the Downed Animal and Food Safety Protection Act (HR 661). This act would amend the Humane Methods of Livestock Slaughter Act of 1958 to prohibit downed animals from becoming part of the human food supply. Senator Daniel Akaka (D-HI) is introducing similar legislation in the U.S. Senate. Proponents of the legislation believe that downed animals can pose serious health threats, citing a Swiss study that found non-ambulatory cattle are more likely to have bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). However, a recent Harvard risk assessment found that removing downers from the food supply did little to reduce the risk of BSE. It found that removing high risk tissues, or SRMs, from animals over 30 months of age almost completely eliminates potential human exposure. USDA implemented a temporary ban on processing downed cattle for the human food supply after the first case of BSE in 2003. This bill would make that temporary measure permanent. It would also cover sheep, swine, goats, horses and mules, and calls for immediate, humane euthanasia as soon as an animal becomes non-ambulatory.

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Survey Reveals Most Producers Approve of Beef Checkoff

Last week the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced the results of the Beef Checkoff Survey, which was conducted nationally among beef, dairy, and veal producers. From October 4 through November 21, 2006, the Gallup Organization, with oversight by USDA, interviewed 8,002 beef, dairy and veal producers to measure their attitudes regarding the Beef Checkoff Program. The program assesses \$1-per-head on all cattle sold in the United States and \$1-per-head equivalent on imported cattle, beef and beef products, to invest in programs aimed at increasing demand for beef. USDA oversees the program, which is administered by the Cattlemen's Beef Promotion and Research Board (Cattlemen's Beef Board). The survey was conducted in response to a settlement agreement between Cattlemen's Beef Board and the Livestock Marketing Association as a result of a May 2005 U.S. Supreme Court decision, which ruled the Beef Promotion and Research Act constitutional. Representatives of the USDA, Cattlemen's Beef Board, the Livestock Marketing Association, and the Federation of State Beef Councils worked together to develop the survey questions. 72% of those surveyed either strongly approved or somewhat approved of the Beef Checkoff Program and some respondents noted that they would like to see more advertising and more information about how checkoff funds are spent. 66% of those surveyed would strongly approve or somewhat approve of the Cattlemen's Beef Board contracting directly "with any entity, including businesses, university researchers, advertising and marketing agencies, and other consultants." Currently, the Beef Promotion and Research Act requires that the Cattlemen's Beef Board contract only with "established national nonprofit industry-governed organizations ... to implement programs of promotion, research, consumer information and industry information." 82% of those surveyed would strongly approve or somewhat approve of "voting periodically on the continuation of the Beef Checkoff Program" and 92% agreed that "if it were possible, all or at least some portion of the Beef Checkoff dollars should be used to promote only U.S. born and raised beef." Currently, the program promotes beef, in general, and importers also pay into the program. Even if promoting only U.S. born and raised beef meant canceling the checkoff assessment on imported beef and beef products, 75.4% of respondents still agree that a portion of the checkoff dollars should be used to promote only U.S. beef. Currently, about \$8 million or 10% of the total assessments collected comes from imports. The final report is available on USDA's website at www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/mpb/rp-beef.htm.

FSIS Posts Summary Report of State Program Reviews

FSIS recently posted on its website the summary report of state program reviews. The report summarizes the results from comprehensive reviews of 28 states that currently operate meat and poultry inspection programs. The reviews were initiated in 2003 because report language in the 2002 Farm Bill called for USDA to provide Congress with a report on a full review of state inspection programs. As part of this effort, FSIS created a review manual that contains a two-part methodology for the state reviews: annual self assessments by the states and FSIS on-site reviews. Twenty eight states currently operate State MPI programs: Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. These programs provide inspection to more than 1900 small and very small establishments under a cooperative agreement with FSIS. A State's program must enforce requirements "at least equal to" those imposed under the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA), the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA), and the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA). Based on the FY 2006 self-assessments and onsite reviews conducted between 2003 - 2006, FSIS determined that 27 of the 28 State programs supported an "at least equal to" determination. One State program (New Mexico) is deferred, pending verification of their implementation of corrective actions. The summary report is available at www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Review_of_State_Programs.pdf.



POSITION AVAILABLE

Food Safety Net Services, is a fast-growing private company seeking to hire an Auditing Specialist to work at our San Antonio, Texas facility. This individual will conduct food safety, animal welfare, regulatory, product evaluation, and customized audits for plants and processing facilities in the meat, pork, and poultry areas as well as other food industry areas. Please apply on our website @ www.food-safetynet.com. FSNS is an EOE.

Register now for "Developing & Implementing HACCP Plans for the Meat Industry"

to be held at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, February 13-15, 2007, hosted by SMA and the Texas A&M Department of Animal Science. Registration forms are available on our website at southwestmeat.org, or by contacting the SMA office.

Sign up today!

Bipartisan Committee Urges Vote Against Horse Slaughter Ban

In a "Dear Colleague" letter issued last Thursday by leadership of the House Committee on Agriculture and the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Representatives Collin Peterson (D-MN), John Dingell (D-MI), Bob Goodlatte (R-VA), and Joe Barton (R-TX) urged fellow Members of Congress to vote against legislation that proposes a ban on slaughtering horses for human consumption. The letter stated, "Last year, the House Committee on Agriculture overwhelmingly rejected the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act by a vote of 37-3. We strongly encourage you not to co-sponsor the legislation that has been reintroduced in the 110th Congress. This legislation, which is being promoted by PETA and the Humane Society of the United States, is bad for horse welfare, bad for animal agriculture, and bad for the U.S. economy." The letter explained how the Nation's infrastructure of animal rescue facilities for horses is already overrun and no one has any idea how 90,000 or more unwanted horses that currently go to the processing plants will be cared for if the plants are closed. "Over 200 national, state, and local horse owner organizations, humane groups, and state and county government associations oppose the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act because they know that the processing plants serve a vital function in assuring a humane, federally supervised end-of-life option for unwanted horses," the leaders said, and went on to name some of the nation's largest and most prestigious animal medicine groups, like the American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, and the majority of the nation's horse owner organizations, which are also opposed to the legislation. "A study conducted by a number of land grant university professors, entitled "The Unintended Consequences of a Ban on Horse Slaughter in the United States," released last year, found that if the plants had been closed in 2000, the cumulative annual cost to taxpayers to care for these unwanted horses would have exceeded \$500 million just five years later," they added. To download the study and find copies of the existing regulations, a complete list of the organizations that oppose this legislation, and other facts and figures that explain why this is bad legislation, visit www.commonhorsesense.com.

Briefly . . .



SMA Members Donate to Help Tacey: Texas A&M soccer coach, G. Guerrieri, through his foundation, has organized a charity bash on February 3 benefitting Tacey Raulerson, who has Bilateral Retinoblastoma. She is the granddaughter of longtime SMA member and leader, Morris Bolton, and as a gesture to honor Morris' many years of service to SMA, many members have already pledged contributions towards an SMA donation to this cause. Donations will help defray her family's mounting medical expenses. If you would like to contribute towards this SMA donation, please contact Joe Harris (joe@southwestmeat.org) by Thursday, February 1. To learn more about Tacey and her indomitable spirit, visit her website at www.taceyraye.mysite.com/index.html.

FSIS Clarifies Jurisdiction on Flavor Products: FSIS published a *Federal Register* notice on January 26 to clarify that flavor products, e.g., flavor bases, and blended and reaction/process flavors, with greater than three percent raw meat or poultry, or two percent or more cooked meat or poultry, in their formulation are amenable to FSIS jurisdiction. The agency is accepting comments through the Federal eRulemaking Portal at www.regulations.gov or by e-mail at FSIS.RegulationsComments@usda.gov. The notice is available on FSIS' website at www.fsis.usda.gov/Regulations_&_Policies/index.asp.

Smithfield Phases Out Sow Gestation Stalls: Smithfield Foods, Inc. announced last week that it is beginning the process of phasing out individual gestation stalls at all of its company-owned sow farms and replacing them with pens, or group housing, over the next 10 years. Smithfield also will work with its contract growers regarding system conversion. "Working with our customers, who have made their views known on the issue of gestation stalls, we are pleased to be taking this precedent-setting step," said C. Larry Pope, chief executive officer of Smithfield Foods.

Researchers Develop Portable Detector for Bird Flu: Researchers at the University of Arkansas have developed a portable device that they say is capable of quickly detecting avian flu in poultry. "Rapid detection is the key to controlling the spread of avian influenza," said Yanbin Li, professor of biological engineering at the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture. "Techniques currently used to detect the disease are either time consuming, too expensive or not specific to subtypes of avian influenza viruses." The device, known as a biosensor, can detect the bird flu strain H5N1 using tracheal swab samples from poultry. The screening takes less than 30 minutes, researchers said. "Our device provides robust and reliable results and introduces the concept of real-time detection to facilitate a coordinated and rapid response," Li said. The research team, led by Li, included Billy Hargis, professor of poultry science; Steve Tung, associate professor of mechanical engineering and Luc Berghman, associate professor of immunology at Texas A&M University. Sold commercially, the biosensor would cost less than \$8,000, and testing fees would be about \$10 per sample, Li said.