

October 17, 2002
Honorable George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20050

Dear Mr. President:

In a March 8th, 2002 speech, you stated that you were concerned about "this nation leading the world to rout out terror wherever it exists so our children and grandchildren can live in freedom." (emphasis added) For 330,000 Americans and their families each year, terror begins after consuming government-inspected food purchased at their local grocery store, or after dining at a neighborhood restaurant, or even after eating a government-purchased school lunch. 5,000 people will die a brutally painful death this year and another 325,000 hospitalized because of dangerous organisms in their food.

Mr. President, food should not be allowed to continue as a vector for terror where, every day, 14 innocent, unsuspecting Americans will be killed and another 890 hospitalized because of preventable food poisoning.

Food should be the sustenance of life, not a death warrant.

This minute, there is a nationwide recall of over 27 million pounds of "ready-to-eat" lunch meat contaminated with the deadly *Listeria monocytogenes* organism. 23 people have already been reported dead from this product.

Your administration inherited a new regulation that could have quite possibly prevented this latest foodborne illness outbreak and dozens more deaths - had it been implemented. Instead, your Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman and her Undersecretary for Food Safety, Elsa Murano, have stalled it, citing the need for another risk assessment before implementing it, which could take years. They have done this despite the recommendation of the Secretary of Agriculture's own advisory committee, which stated that, "This consideration of risk may not necessitate, in all situations, an in-depth quantitative risk assessment which requires extensive resources and time, particularly if it would unnecessarily delay timely protection of public health."

Back on that same March evening, as you spoke about a war on terror, four recalls of *Listeria* - contaminated

food were underway. Another would begin within the week. The terror of *Listeria* -contaminated food is well voiced on S.T.O.P.'s webpage by one woman forced to deliver her 27-week old baby on Christmas Day because of Listeriosis:

"At 2 AM I deliver a 3 1/2 lb baby girl I get to see her for about 30 seconds before they whisk her off to the NICU. After I am cleaned up, they take me to the NICU where I finally get a good look at my little girl. She is very purple with dark colored specks all over her body. She is on a ventilator which is helping her breathe and has many tubes coming off of her" I don't sleep that night, I keep going to the NICU to be with her. I see the scariest thing ever during this night: she stops breathing even with the machine. A nurse thumps on her chest and she starts again" I am not given much information except for the fact that it was probably something that I ate while I was pregnant and it is now killing my baby."

This S.T.O.P. member's newborn child lived only one day.

President Bush, we need those listeria protections implemented NOW!

And we need a wholesale commitment from your administration to put all of its power into fighting foodborne disease. The terror of *Listeria* typifies the terror of all foodborne diseases:

- These deadly organisms can't be seen, smelled or tasted.
- They most often seriously harm and kill children, the elderly, the immune-compromised and the fetuses of pregnant women.
- Their brutal illnesses often lead to devastating long-term health consequences. In the case of *Listeria*, one in 20 victims die.

In that March 8th speech, you emphasized government's role in assuring corporate accountability. "All people involved in our capitalistic system must assume responsibility for leadership," you stated. "In ... the world of publicly held corporations, there are laws and regulations which hold people accountable. They need to be clear and they need to be tough when people misuse the public trust." [emphasis added.]

Meanwhile, your Secretary of Agriculture refuses to request authority from Congress to impose tough civil penalties on companies that betray the public trust by violating food safety procedures

and regulations. She also refuses to request authority for recalling contaminated food within her department's purview.

President Bush, your administration has now presided over two of the largest three contaminated meat recalls in history. Surely this is not what you meant by "homeland security".

5,000 people lose their lives each year to foodborne diseases like E. coli O157:H7, Salmonella and Listeria. All of these deaths result from the unforgivable pollution of our food between field and fork. Almost all could have, and should have, been prevented.

We respectfully urge you to recognize this preventable epidemic as we do, as a shame and an outrage in a nation that boasts the most advanced food production system in the world. We urge that you declare a "war on foodborne illness", and begin recruiting armies of professionals dedicated to public health. We urge you to arm your administration with clear vision, fair regulations and tough enforcement tools, in order to reverse the quickly rising tide of preventable foodborne contamination that results in illness and death.

Mr. President, our children and our families deserve not to encounter terror at the dinner table. We would welcome the opportunity to speak with you in person on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Nancy Donley

President

Mother of Alex (1987-1993)

Karen Taylor Mitchell

Executive Director

i The Centers for Disease Control

ii The National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Food, "Response to the Questions Posed by FSIS Regarding Performance Standards for Ground Beef Products", adopted January 25, 2002, Washington DC.