

FSIS MEETING HEAVILY WEIGHTED TOWARD MEAT INDUSTRY

December 9, 2002

Secretary Ann Veneman
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Jamie L Whitten Building
14th Street & Independence Avenue S.W., Room 200-A
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Veneman,

The Safe Food Coalition applauds FSIS for convening a public meeting Dec 12 to spotlight contaminated food recall and for inviting consumer groups to participate as speakers. However, the current design of the forum is heavily weighted towards industry speakers and includes vastly insufficient opportunity for public health and consumer input. Given the importance of an effective recall policy as a consumer and public health protection, we believe that such a forum is a recipe for poor policy.

In particular, we are greatly concerned that the agenda does not include any public health experts from the Centers for Disease Control. Considering the central role of CDC FoodNet and PulseNet data in past recalls, such exclusion in a forum aimed at "Improving the Recall Process" seems an egregious oversight. CDC expertise is fundamental to this topic, both because of the use of epidemiological data in outbreak detection and the CDC's experience in mounting an effective public health response to infectious disease.

Second, given the inclusion of a 30-minute agenda item during which a meat industry speaker will comprehensively examine the recall process from "an industry point of view", we believe that a public health official and a consumer representative should be given equal time allotments to present contrasting points of view. While we greatly appreciate that consumers have been included on each afternoon panel, there are many important consumer and health concerns that fall outside the scope of the narrowly-drawn panel topics. Consumers and health experts, just like industry, must be given the opportunity to weigh in regarding the overall design and purpose of the recall process.

In short, we urge you to restructure this meeting in order to procure leadership input from CDC's Diarrheal and Infectious Disease branch and to ensure adequate input from organizations working in the public interest. In addition, we ask you to consider making a public statement clarifying that the USDA's priority for food recalls is to exert the very highest level of protection for the public health - something that we feel is not communicated clearly by the forum agenda as currently published.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Karen Taylor Mitchell, MPA
Executive Director

On behalf of:

AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION
CENTER FOR SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST
CONSUMER FEDERATION OF AMERICA
CONSUMERS UNION
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT
PUBLIC CITIZEN

cc:

Dr. Elsa Murano, Undersecretary for Food Safety

Dr. Garry McKee, Administrator, Food Safety and Inspection Service