

Letter to George W. Bush

23 September 2004

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

Dear Honorable George W. Bush,

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 76 million Americans were sickened, 325,000 were hospitalized and 5,000 died last year from foodborne disease. The USDA's Economic Research Service estimates that the top five foodborne illnesses alone cost Americans \$6.9 billion every year in medical costs, lost productivity and premature deaths. Obviously, foodborne disease is a serious public health issue that affects all Americans. With the election nearing, American consumers must know the candidates' position on food safety.

We are asking all presidential candidates to publicly state whether or not they would support:

The establishment of a single food safety agency.

In the wake of the tragedy of 9/11, America consolidated the fragmented authority and responsibility for protecting this nation from terrorism into a single Office of Homeland Security. For similar reasons, the responsibility for securing the safety of our food supply must be consolidated into a single federal food safety agency. Currently, no single federal agency is responsible and accountable for safety of our food; the safety net for preventing foodborne illness is fragmented across numerous federal agencies. This results in inconsistency, irregularity, lack of focus and dangerous gaps allowing contaminated food to make its way to our kitchen tables.

Government authority to recall contaminated and potentially deadly food.

Simply consolidating existing responsibility and authority into a single agency will not be enough without the authority to require the recall of food products that have been discovered to carry deadly pathogens. Shockingly, when scientific testing proves that a particular food product is carrying life-threatening disease agents, our government is now powerless to order these deadly foodstuffs removed from commerce. Our food security officials must have authority to mandate recalls of contaminated food.

A uniform, mandatory and enforceable traceability system designed to protect public health.

Americans want clean, wholesome food that is traceable to its source and accountable for its quality. Americans do not want deadly pathogens in their food. When the prevention system fails and people are sickened by food that carries deadly pathogens, it is critical to quickly trace that defective product back to the original source. Information and accountability are essential to a successful system of food safety. If a product cannot be linked to its source, the entity responsible for the product cannot be held accountable for its quality. Food producers should not be excluded from this aspect of market scrutiny.

Enforceable, microbial performance standards to control the presence of pathogens in food.

One more element must be added if we are to have a food supply security system that is reliable and effective: enforceable, science-based microbial performance standards, for each stage of the food production and distribution chain, that define what safe food is and what is unacceptable. In 1998, the U.S. Department of Agriculture switched from its traditional sight, smell and probe meat and poultry inspection system to a process oriented, science-based system called Hazard Analysis at Critical Control Points (HACCP). The HACCP Final Rule gave USDA the authority to shut down plants that repeatedly failed to meet HACCP standards. Since HACCP is a regulation and not a law, this authority was successfully challenged in two court cases. Without enforceable, microbial, critical control point testing and end-product microbial performance standards, it is unlikely that HACCP will achieve its goal of reducing pathogens on raw meat and poultry products.

Safe Tables Our Priority is a non-profit grassroots organization whose mission is to reduce suffering, illness and death from foodborne disease. We cannot do it alone. We need the help of our country's leaders. With one in four Americans suffering from a foodborne illness each year, American voters need to know where our potential leaders stand on these four cornerstones for safe food. We await your response.

Karen Taylor Mitchell, MPA
Executive Director

S.T.O.P. - Safe Tables Our Priority

Nancy Donley
President
S.T.O.P. - Safe Tables Our Priority
Mother of Alex (1987-1993)
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