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U.S. food safety spotlighted in House Ag subcommittee hearing

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Food industry executives and the Administrator of the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) agreed in a House Agriculture Subcommittee hearing on food safety April 23 that their close working partnership has created the world's safest food supply – and that they will continue working together on further improvements.

FSIS Administrator Alfred Almanza said that “In order to improve upon our preventative system of identifying the inherent risks of different food products and establishments, we must continue to evolve towards an even more science-based, data driven inspection system.” He noted that with its current system, FSIS has over 9,500 employees “protecting the public health in approximately 6,200 federally-regulated establishments nationwide,” carrying out some 9 million food safety and 1.5 million food defense verification procedures each year at these plants. He said FSIS inspected “about 50 billion pounds of livestock carcasses, about 59 billion pounds of poultry carcasses, and about 4.3 billion pounds of processed egg products. . . [and] 3.3 billion pounds of imported meat and poultry products at our borders.”

Dr. Elizabeth A. Krushinskie, Director of Quality Assurance and Food Safety for Mountaire Farms, on behalf of the National Chicken Council joined other industry officials who praised FSIS. She also pointed out that the now-mandatory Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) system was originally developed voluntarily by industry. She said “The key to success with HACCP has been industry's commitment to food safety. FSIS mandates HACCP plans and verifies compliance with the plans, but it is the plants that conduct hazard analyses and adopt and implement controls to address potential food safety hazards. The role of government is to ensure that plants have effective plans and comply with applicable regulations governing their implementation. It is not government's responsibility to second guess a plant's hazard analyses or controls determined to be appropriate for a specific product or establishment. It is critically important that each plant has the flexibility to tailor its HACCP system to its unique circumstances.”

FSIS Administrator Almanza explained that USDA is committed to a detailed review of the U.S. food safety system and to asking “hard questions about what level of inspection

is appropriate for different kinds of foods, what roles are appropriate for the different agencies involved in food safety, and how we approach uniformity in import safety.”

Rep. Randy Neugebauer (R-TX), Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy and Poultry, welcomed that commitment but cautioned against the federal government “trying to be the sheriff rather than working with the industry.”

To read witness statements from the April 23rd hearing on food safety, go to:
<http://agriculture.house.gov/hearings/statements.html>

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