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Secretaries Sebelius & Vilsack working together on food issues

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Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told the National Food Policy Conference in Washington, DC Wednesday that she and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack are leading a government-wide preventive approach in dealing with food and health issues. Promising that HHS will “focus relentlessly on prevention,” she said that “We can’t afford to be reacting when it comes to human health.”

Sebelius listed the runaway costs of continuing with the status quo – such as the soaring rate of childhood obesity which has contributed to an annual cost of nearly \$150 billion to pay for obesity-related health problems. She said the obesity bill has doubled since 1998 – and now is far above the \$93 billion annual cost for treating all forms of cancer. She called for a national investment in “good childhood nutrition” to reverse the escalation in life-long health-related costs.

Sebelius highlighted food safety as important way to bring down the costs involved in food-related illnesses which affect some 76 million Americans each year, leading to 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths. As an example of what can be done to improve food safety, she cited new Food & Drug Administration (FDA) rules for protecting eggs from salmonella contamination. She the rules impose new costs. But she said the costs for testing eggs for salmonella and refrigerating them during shipping add up to less than one cent per dozen eggs – and result in \$1.4 billion in annual health care savings.

As part of the government’s new proactive determination to “anticipate and prevent” health problems, Sebelius announced a new joint HHS/USDA web site launched Wednesday at www.foodsafety.gov. The site provides “one-stop-shopping” where consumers have easy access to the latest information on food safety and food recalls. As well, the site provides information on reporting food-related illness, with phone numbers and links to the appropriate agencies. Consumers can sign up in one easy place to receive email and RSS alerts on recalled or potentially unsafe food and hear from the top scientific experts across the government on food safety. Later phases of the site will include recall feeds for texting and mobile phones.

Seblius pointed out that the new site also offers a “Food Safety Widget” which can be downloaded for use on other websites, to provide instant updates on the latest food recalls. She said the updates should make it possible to isolate recalls geographically, so that consumers will know if a particular product is being recalled in one specific area of the country but safe to consume in other areas, thus limiting the economic impact and disruptions caused by recalls.

In a sign of how closely HHS and USDA are working together, the announcement of the new food safety site included these remarks:

HHS Secretary Sebelius: “The highest mission of any government is keeping its citizens safe. In this administration, we see public health as an essential part of that mission and this new website as an essential way we will help keep people safe from unhealthy food and food handling practices and up-to-date on critical food recalls. Consumers no longer will have to search around in different places trying to figure out which agency manages which food product. All the information that they will need will be one easy place at foodsafety.gov.”

Secretary Tom Vilsack: “Protecting the health and well-being of the American people is a fundamental responsibility of the federal government. Our new and innovative approach to connecting consumers to food safety information in an easy and timely manner is a critical improvement in this effort. . .

FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg: “This site focuses on prevention by highlighting the steps both businesses and consumers can take to avoid illness. It also will be a clearinghouse for information on the latest FDA rules and guidance.”

CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden: “Health departments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) rely on information from many places, including consumers, when it comes to tracking food-borne illnesses across the country and the world. With this new Web site, consumers will quickly know who to contact if they believe they became ill from eating a certain food. Those reports of illness can help us identify potential outbreaks sooner and strengthen our efforts to protect Americans from unsafe food and food-borne illness.”

USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Jerry Mande: “Protecting the American people from food-borne illness is a critical mission of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Our work is designed to prevent outbreaks of food borne illness from occurring and to react quickly and decisively to contamination in the food supply. The new www.foodsafety.gov site will provide families with a one-stop online shop for all the latest information they need to reduce the danger of food-borne illnesses.”