



FSIS charged with repeated failures to enforce Humane Animal Handling Act

By Agri-Pulse Staff

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Washington, March 5 – A public health veterinarian with USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) said the agency fails to support inspectors who are “just trying to do their job” to protect animal welfare and food safety. In testimony before a House subcommittee this week, Dean Wyatt said USDA officials not only overturned his recommendations, siding with slaughter plants in violation of federal law, but also personally retaliated against him for trying to enforce the law.

Wyatt, who has been with the USDA for 18 years, was among several witnesses called before the House Government Affairs Subcommittee on Domestic Policy, which convened in response to a Government Accountability Office report that cited the department for failing to consistently enforce the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. The GAO called for stronger enforcement of the act, including establishing “clear and specific” criteria for suspending plant operations; improving standards for compliance; and more closely examining noncompliance reports.

Wyatt said he recommended suspending operations at a Vermont packing plant three times for improper animal handling and in each instant, district agency officials reopened the plant without addressing his concerns. It wasn’t until the later disclosure of video shot during an undercover visit by the Humane Society of the United States and showing what was alleged to be the inhumane treatment of calves that the FSIS shut the plant down. The video was shown to committee members.

Stanley Painter, an official with the union representing government food inspection workers, said the USDA did not provide adequate support or training for inspectors at the nation’s slaughter plants.

Jerald Mande, USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety, told the committee that FSIS will “significantly strengthen” its analysis of humane handling data this year, particularly with the launch of a Public Health Information System (PHIS) that will allow the agency to provide ongoing, real-time assessment, analysis and surveillance of public health, food defense and humane handling data. Mande insisted that when FSIS inspection personnel observe “egregious” humane handling violations, they take

immediate action to issue a suspension that effectively shuts down all or part of a plant's operations.

Subcommittee Chairman Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) cited the GAO's findings that the FSIS suffered from "serious management problems" that compromise the enforcement of humane handling laws. However, he said "there is new leadership at the troubled agency, and they are talking about a new commitment to enforce the law." Kucinich said the subcommittee would continue to monitor the agency's enforcement efforts.

To read the testimony prepared for Thursday's hearing on "Continuing Problems in USDA's Enforcement of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act," go to:
http://oversight.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4817&Itemid=31.

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