

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

February 27, 2015

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

As you know, *Salmonella* is one of the most common causes of foodborne illness. It is responsible for more hospitalizations and deaths than any other foodborne pathogen.¹ Every year, *Salmonella* is estimated to cause 1.2 million illnesses in the United States, with 19,000 hospitalizations and 380 deaths.² According to the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) own reports, 50% of ground chicken³ and 26% of cut-up chicken⁴ sampled test positive for *Salmonella*. The level of this dangerous pathogen in our food supply is unacceptably high and we call on the USDA to act aggressively to reduce this major public health threat.

Specifically, we write in support of a Citizen Petition urging the USDA to issue an interpretative rulemaking declaring the four most virulent strains of antibiotic resistant (ABR) *Salmonella*—Hadar, Heidelberg, Newport, and Typhimurium—to be adulterants when found in raw meat and poultry products, pursuant to the Federal Meat Inspection Act and Poultry Products Inspection Act. Compared to other strains, ABR *Salmonella* is associated with an increased risk of longer and more severe illness and hospitalization. *Consumer Reports* recently found that 40% of chicken tainted with *Salmonella* contained a multidrug-resistant strain.⁵

This petition was filed by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) on October 1, 2014. It is both disappointing and troubling that nearly five months have passed and CSPI has not yet received a response from the USDA. While we understand that the USDA has a number of competing priorities, we believe CSPI's request for an expedited response, in accordance with 9 CFR § 392.8, is warranted because their requested actions would significantly enhance public health. We urge you to honor this request.

The national *Salmonella* Heidelberg outbreak in Foster Farms retail chicken that spanned from March 2013 to July 2014 underscores the USDA's current inability to stop a threat to public health and

¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/2011-foodborne-estimates.html>

² <http://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/PDFs/pathogens-complete-list-01-12.pdf>

³ <https://catalog.data.gov/dataset/quarterly-progress-reports-on-salmonella-and-campylobacter-testing>

⁴ http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/a9837fc8-0109-4041-bd0c-729924a79201/baseline_data_raw_chicken_parts.pdf?mod=ajperes

⁵ <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/magazine/2014/02/the-high-cost-of-cheap-chicken/index.htm>

highlights why a favorable response to CSPI's petition is urgently requested. Even though public health officials were able to determine the source of the outbreak relatively quickly, the tainted products remained on retail shelves for an additional 10 months. Had the USDA declared ABR *Salmonella* an adulterant, the agency could have taken immediate enforcement actions to prevent the over 350 additional cases that ensued even after the source of the outbreak became known.

We believe it is long overdue for the USDA to declare the most dangerous strains of *Salmonella* an adulterant—the same way *E. coli* O157:H7 was declared an adulterant in 1994. Declaring ABR *Salmonella* an adulterant is not only within the USDA's authority, as clearly outlined in the petition, but also part of their core responsibility to protect American consumers from foodborne public health threats. As it stands, consumers cannot trust that when ABR *Salmonella* is found on a meat or poultry product, the USDA will be able to take necessary action to remove the product from stores if the retailer or processor does not issue a voluntary recall. American consumers are counting on the USDA to prevent unnecessary illnesses and deaths.

We would like an update regarding the status of CSPI's petition, including when and how you intend to respond. As supporters of CSPI's petition, we urge you to respond favorably. Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. We sincerely hope that the USDA treats this issue with the urgency it is warranted.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate



ROSA L. DELAURO
Member of Congress