

Women in Agriculture

Remarks by
Linda Swacina, Associate Administrator
Food Safety and Inspection Service
United States Department of Agriculture

USDA: Improving Food Safety in the United States and the World

Good afternoon. It certainly is a pleasure being here in the beautiful, historic city of Madrid and with a group of people who are dedicated to improving the opportunities for rural women around the globe.

I am Linda Swacina, the Associate Administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service, which is responsible for ensuring a safe meat, poultry and egg products supply. USDA's actions to safeguard these food products form a comprehensive food safety net in the United States. Because we have the same safety requirements for the U.S. meat and poultry produced for export and for products entering the U.S., our efforts have a worldwide impact.

Why does safe food matter so much? In addition to being available and nutritious, food must also be safe to eat. Having safe food available to citizens around the world is vital for protecting public health.

Without safe food, we face a tremendously high number of foodborne illnesses, which significantly burdens nations – both developed and developing – with short- and long-term health problems and economic costs. In the United States alone where we have a relatively safe supply of food, foodborne illness can cost billions annually in terms of medical costs and lost wages.

In addition, foodborne illness continues to represent an enormous societal impact worldwide. Even though major strides have been made in decreasing infant mortality worldwide, according to the World Health Organization, children under five still suffer an estimated 1.5 billion annual episodes of diarrhea, resulting in more than three million premature deaths. Too many of these illnesses and deaths are still the result of unsafe food.

What can women do worldwide to ensure that the food they get is not only nutritious but safe? Women play such a vital role in reducing foodborne illnesses since many are providers within their families and have a tremendous amount of responsibility for food preparation. Producing safe food requires careful attention along every step on the farm-to-table continuum.

In addition to food preparation responsibilities for their families, more women around the globe are obtaining careers which involve agricultural policy-making decisions. At USDA for example, the department is led by Secretary Ann Veneman and the Office of Food Safety is directed by Under Secretary Dr. Elsa Murano, two very important women whose decisions are improving the food safety and supply worldwide.

Today, I want to provide some insight on how the U.S. food safety system has evolved over the years, and because this evolution must continue to keep pace with new science, I want to illustrate the actions we are taking to improve food safety not only in the United States, but around the world.

USDA's Contribution to Food Safety at Home and Abroad

Evolution Toward a Science-Based Food Safety System

About a hundred years ago, the first meat inspection laws were passed in the United States in response to a public outcry over deplorable conditions in meatpacking plants depicted in Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*. For nearly 90 years after the Federal Meat Inspection Act was passed by Congress in 1906, USDA used an inspection method that relied solely on sight and smell to make sure the nation's meat and poultry were safe.

However, as the United States went through rapid industrial development during the 20th century, agriculture and society changed as well. Larger and more complex slaughterhouse and food processing establishments took the place of small, family farm-style operations.

The grocery store around the corner no longer sold meat they butchered at the store from local cattle; they now sold meat from all corners of the world that had been butchered in one of these large establishments.

At the same time, we were learning more and more about the hazards in food. While animal diseases were the primary concern in the early 1900s, other hazards exist that cannot be seen with the naked eye. With significant improvements in animal health, microbial pathogens emerged in the late 1900's as the biggest threat to human health.

USDA had to change its meat and poultry inspection program to address the dangers from microbial contamination. Six years ago, we started implementing a sweeping reform of federal food safety rules for meat and poultry. The new science-based, prevention-oriented inspection system requires meat and poultry slaughter and processing establishments to implement systems that identify, target and reduce harmful bacteria on their products. And it requires USDA to verify that industry is meeting government requirements for safe food produced in a sanitary environment.

Since this prevention-based inspection system was an entirely new concept for plants, USDA gradually phased the new inspection system in at large, then small, and finally very small plants. Since many new small plant owners don't speak English as a first language, we provided assistance materials in several languages.

We have some important indicators of success. For instance, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released data earlier this year, which showed that the number of foodborne illnesses in the United States has declined and that the new system is partially responsible for the lower numbers.

This data is encouraging; however, we realize there is much more that can be done to improve our food safety system. We are continually looking at ways to improve our meat and poultry inspection system with new methods and procedures, scientific advancements, and application of innovative technologies.

Cooperation Toward Food Security Since September 11

Cooperation is the key to an effective food safety system. In light of the tragic events in the United States on September 11, 2001, biosecurity activities were strengthened at all levels of the U.S. Federal Government. USDA participates in an interagency group called the Food Threat Preparedness Network, or PrepNet, to proactively protect the food supply. PrepNet also will serve as a rapid response system in the event of deliberate attack on the food supply. In addition, USDA is working on assessing potential vulnerabilities along the farm-to-table continuum and has developed food-security guidelines for food processors.

Public Participation

Public participation is an important element in developing food safety policies at USDA. We value the involvement of all stakeholders including consumers, industry, and academia. We have held countless public meetings over the past several years on every aspect of our food-safety strategy and we have been

pleased with the quality of discussions and recommendations that have emerged.

Public participation is extremely important in allowing us to achieve our food safety goals by helping us to implement science-based policies that are supported by our constituents. This does not mean that everyone gets what he or she wants. Regulatory agencies must make the ultimate policy decisions because we are responsible for the results. But the public process ensures that common ground is reached and our policies are scientifically sound. This is very important to the success of our food safety initiatives, as well as maintaining public confidence in the safety of our food supply.

Education

Another important component in the success of our food safety initiatives is education. Foodborne disease is preventable and that is why USDA has an obligation to provide food-safety guidance to consumers. USDA carries out an aggressive public food safety education program to help consumers and food handlers in restaurants and institutions such as hospitals understand how they play a vital role in producing safe food. In the United States, many meals are eaten away from home, so educating all food handlers is critical.

One thing we have learned about foodborne illness is that certain populations are at increased risk of becoming ill. We know, for example, that individuals who are immune-compromised, and the very young and very old, fall into this category.

In addition, pregnant women are at an increased risk of passing listeriosis on to their unborn children. Listeriosis is an illness caused by eating foods contaminated with a kind of bacteria, called *Listeria monocytogenes*. Animals carry *Listeria monocytogenes* in their intestines without becoming sick. Food processors can destroy the bacteria through cooking or other heating methods in the production of ready-to-eat foods such as dry sausage, hot dogs, and luncheon meats, but these foods can become contaminated again after they leave the plant. An outbreak of listeriosis in pregnant women can lead to miscarriages, stillbirths, or serious health problems for newborn children.

That is why we have specifically targeted pregnant women and their physicians with a patient education sheet titled, *Listeriosis and Pregnancy: What is Your Risk?* This publication contains the latest information on how to reduce the incidence of listeriosis for pregnant women and their unborn babies. It was developed through a partnership involving government, the medical community, and industry. Partnerships are very important in reaching more people with our food safety messages because we can combine our resources.

Another example of a successful educational effort is the Fight BAC![™] campaign, which helps consumers understand the importance of hand washing and proper food-handling procedures in the kitchen. BAC is the shortened form of bacteria, and on all the printed brochures given to consumers and food handlers, BAC is depicted as a green, grotesque-looking creature.

The Fight BAC![™] food safety education promotes four very important messages to consumers. These are: 1) Clean – Wash hands and surfaces often with hot, soapy water; 2) Separate – Don't cross contaminate. Keep raw meat and poultry separated from fruits, vegetables, breads and other foods that are being used in preparation of meals; 3) Cook – Cook to recommended safe temperatures to kill bacteria; and 4) Chill – Refrigerate or freeze foods within two hours. We distribute these messages to consumers through public service announcements, school visits, brochures, as well as magnets that can be applied to refrigerators or other kitchen appliances.

USDA also launched a program to encourage the use of food thermometers, popularly known as The Thermy[™] Campaign, several years ago. Our aim is to educate consumers on the importance of using a food thermometer when cooking meat, poultry, and egg products. Cooking food to the correct temperature is an extremely important method of preventing foodborne illness. Raw meat, poultry and eggs as expected carry bacteria and cooking food properly is vital to killing those bacteria and protecting public health. We will soon expand the program to include the food service and retail sectors.

You can easily obtain more information about our Fight BAC! and Thermy campaign by accessing our Web site at: www.fsis.usda.gov and clicking on the Food Safety Education and Consumer Information link.

Last month, we cosponsored a food safety education conference with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services titled “Thinking Globally – Working Locally” in Orlando, Florida. This conference brought together food safety educators from all over the world to focus on the food safety education implications of the global nature of the food supply. Participants at the same time recognized that worldwide food safety education is very much a local effort, and they took new knowledge and methods back with them to apply in their own localities.

International Food Safety

Beyond the scope of the United States, USDA is also committed to working with our international partners in ensuring a safe food supply worldwide. USDA is actively engaged in the Codex Alimentarius Commission, an international standard-setting body for food safety. I know many of your countries, including Spain, participate in the various Codex committees

The decisions made by Codex have profound effects on national economies and the health and well being of citizens around the world. One important advantage of the Codex process is that international standards help individual countries strengthen their own national food safety systems. This serves to improve consumer confidence in food safety worldwide, and it is especially important for developing countries as they seek to achieve higher levels of food safety and nutrition and expand food trade through exports.

Closing

I hope this brief description has given you a better understanding of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's food-safety policies. While the United States is fortunate to have a food system that is often characterized as abundant, safe, nutritious and economical, our system is far from perfect. Only with input and open dialogue with all those involved in food safety, domestically and internationally, will we further improve food-safety systems worldwide. As women, this is a goal we share, whether we are medical professionals, policy makers, farmers, consumers, or food preparers.