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Email: phyllis@southwestmeat.org

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Edited by Phyllis Zimmerman

Under Secretary Touts Safety of U.S. Beef

In a press statement issued today, Dr. Richard Raymond, USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety, discussed the safety of the U.S. beef supply and assured consumers, both domestic and abroad, of USDA's commitment to ensure food safety. Since South Korea announced plans to reopen their market to U.S. beef, Korean television and Internet sites have protested the decision and passed along some absurd misinformation regarding the safety of American beef. According to news reports, on Tuesday a popular Korean TV current affairs program claimed South Koreans are more susceptible than Americans and Europeans to contracting a rare sickness that can result from eating beef infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy. By the end of the week, the public backlash had become so great that Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun, other government officials and medical experts spoke at a nationally televised news conference to reject such claims. Around 10,000 people staged a candlelight protest in downtown Seoul over the weekend. In his statement, Dr. Raymond outlined the duties of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) inspectors and gave a brief summary of the safeguards against BSE that the United States has in place to protect our food supply. He explained the facts surrounding the Hallmark/Westland recall and reviewed the steps FSIS is taking to strengthen the inspection system. He also mentioned that the CDC has confirmed that a recent death in Virginia was not due to variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease (vCJD), as previously suspected. "Again – I want to stress to all consumers – both domestic and abroad – that U.S. beef is safe," stated Raymond. "USDA takes a number of steps to prevent foodborne illness. The U.S. government's interlocking system of controls to protect the food supply from BSE is effective and provides a level of security recognized as significant worldwide." The press statement is available at www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Raymond_Statement_050408.pdf.

USDA Announces Pork Purchase for Food Assistance Programs

Last week Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer announced USDA's plan to purchase up to \$50 million of pork products which will be donated to child nutrition and other domestic food assistance programs. "We provide food assistance to one in every five Americans," said Schafer. "We are working to increase benefits due to rising food costs and to ensure we have full funding for our food assistance programs." USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) purchases a variety of high-quality food products each year for distribution by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) for the national school lunch program, the school breakfast program, the summer food service program, the food distribution program on Indian reservations, the nutrition program for the elderly, the commodity supplemental food program and the emergency food assistance program. USDA also makes emergency purchases of commodities for distribution to victims of natural disasters. Based upon USDA's intent to buy these pork products, FNS will survey potential recipients to determine how much product will be accepted for shipping. AMS will seek the lowest overall cost by publicly inviting bids to supply the desired quantity and by awarding contracts to responsible bidders. The commodities must meet specified grade requirements and be USDA-inspected or graded to ensure quality. The National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) commended the plan. "The action by USDA to buy additional pork will benefit America's pork producers, the U.S. economy and the people who rely on the government's various food programs," said NPPC President Bryan Black. "It will help our industry reduce the herd and thereby bring supply and demand back into balance and allow producers to continue to provide consumers with economical, nutritious pork."

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4103 SOUTH TEXAS AVENUE, SUITE 101 • BRYAN, TX 77802 • (979) 846-9011 • FAX (979) 846-8198

FSIS Extends Comment Period for *E. Coli*

Last month USDA's food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) held a public meeting to discuss challenges and proposed solutions in moving forward to address recalls and illnesses related to *E. coli* O157:H7. Speakers outside the Agency shared their perspectives on the causes of the recent increase in positive *E. coli* O157:H7 tests at the pre-harvest and processing stages. In addition, they shared their views on how best to move forward. The comment period has now been extended to May 28. FSIS has taken this action to respond to requests that were made during and after the April meeting. Transcripts from the meeting are available for review at www.fsis.usda.gov/Regulations_&_Policies/RD_2008-0011/index.asp.

FSIS Posts 2007 Data for *E. coli* in Raw Beef, RTE Meat, Poultry

FSIS posted on its website the 2007 microbiological data for *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) O157:H7 in raw ground beef samples as well sampling results in Ready-to-Eat meat and poultry for calendar year 2007. The Agency also posted the 2007 Annual Salmonella Progress Report. FSIS verifies that establishments are meeting performance standards by collecting and analyzing randomly selected product samples. This testing program was initiated in the 1990s and has become a key component of the Agency's overall system for hazard analysis and critical control point verification. The objective of the testing program is to estimate the prevalence and levels of bacteria on a sample of inspected carcasses. All FSIS studies focus on foodborne pathogens as they relate to public health. Over time, the Agency has taken steps to improve the effectiveness of testing and its impact on protecting public health through techniques like increased sample size and adoption of more sensitive testing methods. Results for 2007 microbiological data for all three reports are available at www.fsis.usda.gov/Science/Microbiology/index.asp.

USDA, DHS Partnership Reports Progress in Ag Security

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) held a Success through Partnership conference in Washington, D.C. last week to update agricultural stakeholders on the departments' joint effort to strengthen the delivery of the agriculture mission. DHS and USDA are partners in protecting American agriculture against the introduction of unwanted plant pests and foreign animal diseases at our nation's ports of entry. "While we cannot inspect our way to a threat-free import system, we can take steps throughout the process to keep pests and diseases from ever making it to our ports of entry," said Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer. "This meeting gave USDA and DHS an opportunity to exchange ideas with stakeholders and showcase the significant strides we've made, and continue making, to further protect American agriculture." The event included discussions on the activities and progress of DHS' U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) initiatives, the efforts of the Joint Agency Task Force, and the newly established Federal-State Agricultural Quarantine Inspection Partnership Council. The Joint Agency Task Force (Task Force) was formed last April to address concerns about the Agricultural Quarantine Inspection (AQI) program and explore ways to strengthen the DHS and USDA partnership.



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FSIS' *Small Plant News* for March 2008 is available at www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Small_Plant_News_Mar2008.pdf. This issue includes:

- How You Can Prevent Recalls
- Protect Your Suppliers and Distributors
- Food Safety Resources
- Compliance Guidance Issued for Small Plants
- Handling Food Animals with Care



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or use the link on our website at southwestmeat.org!
Registration packets will be mailed in mid-May.**

Briefly . . .

FDA Announces Hiring Initiative: In fiscal year 2008 alone, the FDA wants to fill more than 600 new positions and backfill over 700 others to implement the FDA Amendments Act of 2007, the Food Protection Plan and the Import Safety Action Plan. That's nearly triple the number of people hired from 2005-2007. "It takes a large pool of talented people for the FDA to protect and promote the public health," said John Dyer, FDA's Deputy Commissioner for Operations and Chief Operating Officer. "Each month there is a delay in bringing critical staff on board impairs the agency's ability to fulfill this mission." Biologists, chemists, medical officers, mathematical statisticians and investigators are among the experts in demand at positions throughout the agency.

JEC Begins Hearing on Food Prices: U.S. Senator Charles E. Schumer (D-NY) convened a Joint Economic Committee (JEC) hearing last week to examine skyrocketing food prices and their impact on the finances of already-struggling middle-class families. In the wake of across-the-board price increases of groceries throughout the nation, USDA Chief Economist Dr. Joseph Glauber offered his assessment of the underlying causes behind the dire food crisis. A representative from America's Second Harvest, the largest domestic hunger relief organization, and the President of the National Farmer's Union, as well as other food industry experts were on the panel.

FSIS Podcast Available Through iTunes: Last week FSIS launched a series of educational podcasts tailored to address food safety and education issues for consumers and other stakeholders. After last week's successful launch, the Agency submitted podcasts to the Apple iTunes store, and these are now available on iTunes. While the initial focus is to provide information to small and very small plant owners and operators and their employees, the Agency plans to use this tool to communicate with other stakeholders as well. Users can subscribe to free podcasts through FSIS' website, as well as direct subscription from the iTunes store by typing "Food Safety and Inspection Service podcast" in the search engine. Customers can also go directly to <http://phobos.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewPodcast?id=279346056> to access the podcast.