

SAFE FOOD COALITION

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July 12, 2019

The Honorable George “Sonny” Perdue III
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Establishment-Specific Data Release Strategic Plan (Docket ID: FSIS-2014-0032)

Dear Secretary Perdue:

The undersigned members of the Safe Food Coalition write in support of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) posting additional information about microbiological sampling results in meat and poultry establishments on its website later this month. We encourage FSIS to further disclose all the data and information necessary for the public to identify links between pathogen strains found in FSIS-regulated establishments and confirmed cases of foodborne illness. FSIS has collected this data using public resources. Consequently, the public has a right to access this information. Moreover, web-posting the serotype, genetic profile, and antibiotic resistance profile of each positive pathogen sample found by FSIS regulators may provide important incentives for companies to improve food safety, and foster a better understanding of food safety threats and how to address them.

The decision to post this data is consistent with FSIS’s previous, January 2015 notice, announcing its Establishment-Specific Data Release Strategic Plan.¹ In that announcement, FSIS explained that it would release testing data on various pathogens in various products, including “serotype data” on *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in poultry. As FSIS explained in its notice, these policies are strongly supported by outside experts, including the National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection, which endorsed a more open disclosure policy in 2014,² and the National Academies’ National Research Council (NRC).³ The NRC identified “strong arguments supporting public release of establishment-specific FSIS data, especially data that are subject to release under the FOIA [Freedom of Information Act].”

All of the data to be disclosed are subject to release under FOIA. Indeed, FSIS has received FOIA requests from some of our groups for data that will be disclosed under this policy. The data is important in part because two recent outbreaks—one linked to *Salmonella* Reading in raw turkey and another linked to *Salmonella* Infantis in raw chicken—involved outbreak strains that were found in

¹ FSIS. “Establishment-Specific Data Release Strategic Plan.” (Jan. 2015, 2015, *available at*: <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FSIS-2014-0032-0001>).

² National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection, Subcommittee on FSIS Establishment-Specific Data Release Strategic Plan, “Report and Recommendations.” January 7-8, 2014.

³ National Research Council, “The Potential Consequences of Public Release of Food Safety and Inspection Service Establishment-Specific Data.” The National Academies Press, 2011.

multiple slaughter establishments. Those findings suggest the need for interventions far back in the production chain, possibly at one of the two companies that supply most of the breeding stock for poultry, or at a large feed mill. They also point to the need for slaughter establishments to apply greater scrutiny to their supply lines, and to take preventative steps when serotype, genetic or AMR data indicate that they are sending out product that harbors a virulent pathogen strain.

Web-posting genetic data, in particular, should provide an added measure of accountability for the industry. The United States Task Force for Combating Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria has recommended that pathogens collected by FSIS and other agencies “be stored in a centralized repository that can be linked with relevant public health databases.”⁴ Ideally, individuals would be able to enter genetic information posted by FSIS into the National Center for Biotechnology Information isolates browser on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) website, or a similar platform, in order to identify matches between pathogen genotypes found in slaughter establishments, and those found in case patients.⁵ Already, the NIH website already provides some capability to find such linkages using pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) patterns—the “PFGEPattern” data field described in the FSIS plan. However, FSIS recently phased out performing PFGE to transition to whole genome sequencing (WGS) of pathogen isolates. That transition, according to agency officials, means that data for more recent samples cannot be matched to clinical or other samples posted on the NIH website. Given the waning relevance of PFGE data, we encourage the agency to disclose further genetic information that will make apparent to the public which establishments harbor pathogen strains associated with reported illness cases.

Compelling evidence indicates that greater transparency leads to food safety improvements. Since the George W. Bush Administration, FSIS has web-posted the identities of establishments failing to meet *Salmonella* performance standards.⁶ USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) has found a “strong correlation” between the availability of this information, and poultry processors’ success in meeting food safety goals.⁷ According to ERS, web-posting data provides a “tool for encouraging compliance with food safety” that does not “require costly regulatory oversight and labor devoted to compliance,” but rather creates a market where “buyers determine the appropriate level of food safety and costs.”⁸

FSIS should strive to do as much as possible to help meat and poultry markets operate more efficiently, with the best food safety information possible. We encourage the agency to continue to follow through on its 2015 data release plan by releasing inspection and enforcement data such as regulations verified and compliance status for each verified regulation; whether Food Safety Assessments are performed and why; and humane handling data. Publishing this data will have important public health benefits and spur useful analyses by outside stakeholders. As the agency

⁴ United States Task Force for Combating Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria, National Action Plan for Combating Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria, March 2015, *available at*:

https://www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/pdf/national_action_plan_for_combating_antibiotic-resistant_bacteria.pdf

⁵ See National Institutes of Health. Isolates Browser,

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pathogens/isolates/#/search/taxgroup_name:%22Salmonella%20enterica%22

⁶ Salmonella Verification Sampling Program: Response to Comments and New Agency Policies. 73 Fed. Reg. 4,767 (Jan. 28, 2008), <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2008-01-28/pdf/E8-1432.pdf>.

⁷ Michael Ollinger, James Wilkus, Megan Hrdlicka, and John Bovay. “Public Disclosure of Tests for Salmonella: The Effects on Food Safety Performance in Chicken Slaughter Establishments.” Economic Research Report No. (ERR-231), (May 2017), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=83660>

⁸ *Id.* at 25.

continues to review and improve the process for posting establishment-specific data, we look forward to continued opportunities for engagement.

Sincerely,

Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Consumer Federation of America
Food & Water Watch
Government Accountability Project