



Consumer Federation of America

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Consumer Federation of America Applauds Decision to Declare Additional *E. Coli* Strains As Adulterants

Consumer Federation of America today applauded the decision by the Obama Administration to expand immediately the list of pathogenic *E. coli* strains prohibited in ground beef. The new strains – Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* O26, O45, O113, O111, O121, O145 – are added to the currently banned *E. coli* O157:H7.

CFA and other consumer and public health advocates have been urging this step for years. This action is consistent with the President's pledge, made in March 2009, to assure parents the food they feed their children is safe. It is the first major initiative of this President to improve meat and poultry safety. Scientific data indicate that the 1995 action banning *E. coli* O157:H7 in ground beef has been a significant factor in reducing the toll of disease caused by this pathogen. The new action will further improve the safety of ground beef.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* O157:H7 is responsible for 63,153 foodborne illnesses and 20 deaths each year in the U.S. Last June the CDC reported that in 2010 the U.S. reached its objective reducing illness and death caused by *E. coli* O157:H7 and attributed the progress to a combination of factors, including improved detection methods that resulted in removing contaminated products from commerce, microbial testing, and the prohibition of contamination of ground beef with O157.

At the same time the CDC noted that in 2010 illnesses caused by all of the other pathogenic forms of *E. coli* caused more illnesses than *E. coli* O157:H7. The U.S. has achieved some notable progress in controlling one form of *E. coli* and there is every reason to believe that the action banning six additional virulent forms of the pathogen will provide additional improvements.

The decision to ban these pathogens from ground beef and to begin a testing program in plants to assure their safety controls are adequate to prevent *E. coli* contamination not only will improve public health, it will improve the economic viability of the beef industry. Foodborne illness outbreaks hurt everyone in the food industry. They result in short term loss of sales and reduce the public's confidence in the safety of the food supply. The meat industry has opposed this action as they opposed declaring *E. coli* O157:H7 an adulterant. They tried to stop the earlier action and failed. Then the industry began to take steps to address the problem and most meat industry leaders have acknowledged their products are now safer as a result. In fact, two leading companies, BPI and Costco, initiated a program of testing their ground beef for additional *E. coli* strains months ago.

The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) action plan provides for both prompt and efficient action to protect Americans from these serious health threats. Industry and trading partners have six months to make changes in their safety controls before FSIS begins testing.

The Agency will begin by testing the products that go into ground beef rather than the finished product in order to attack the problem at the earliest point of FSIS's legal authority and to prevent the dispersal of adulterated product. This structure means that FSIS testing will begin first in the large slaughterhouses that supply smaller processing companies with the basic elements that they then turn into ground beef. This should reduce the burden on smaller companies that merely grind product purchased from the large slaughterhouses.

Tests for these additional strains will be done by FSIS as part of its *E. coli* verification testing. The FSIS has stated that adequate safety controls for ground beef require company testing for *E. coli* O157:H7. The additional strains will be treated in the same manner. Regulatory tests for *E. coli* O157:H7 and the additional strains being added will be done by FSIS. Meat trade associations sought to prevent this action and there is some risk that having failed to stop the Obama Administration from putting public health protection first they will seek to get the decision overturned in Congress. We will oppose any such effort and will work to assure that the public knows which companies and which members of Congress are prepared to trade away this important public health protection.

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Consumer Federation of America is an association of nearly 300 non-profit consumer organizations that was established in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through research, education and advocacy.