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Before the Committee on Agriculture,  
Nutrition, and Forestry,  
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FOOD SAFETY

Fundamental Changes  
Needed to Improve the  
Nation's Food Safety  
System

Statement for the Record by  
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute this statement to your hearing on the federal food safety system and the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) associated regulatory authority. As the Committee considers options relative to USDA's authority to recall contaminated food, we would like to draw your attention to the fundamental weaknesses that, in our view, need correcting in order to achieve a fully effective food safety system: namely, regulatory fragmentation and inconsistency. We believe the existing federal food safety structure needs to be replaced with a uniform, risk-based inspection system under a single food safety agency. While some administrative actions can be taken to improve the system, the fundamental changes that are needed will require legislative action.

Recent outbreaks of foodborne illness have once again raised questions about the safety of the U.S. food supply. In August of this year, a number of illnesses caused by hamburger contaminated with E.coli 0157:H7 resulted in the recall of 25 million pounds of ground beef patties and the closing of a major meat processing plant. In 1996, and again in 1997, outbreaks of foodborne illness were traced to raspberries imported from Guatemala that were contaminated with cyclospora, a parasite. Moreover, in April of this year, a hepatitis A outbreak was traced to contaminated strawberries that were served as part of the federal school lunch program. The recent outbreaks are not a new phenomenon, simply well-publicized examples of a much more widespread and ongoing problem. In May 1996, we reported that between 6.5 million and 81 million cases of foodborne illness and as many as 9,100 related deaths occur each year.

(GAO/RCED-96-96.)

In this context, we want to bring to your attention the findings and recommendations expressed in a number of GAO reports on the food safety issue. Our work has pointed time and again to the need to address this issue at a fundamental level. The natural inclination to react to each event with a patch here and a band-aid there has not proven to be an effective long-term solution. As summarized below and discussed more fully in the reports listed in the Related GAO Products section, our work demonstrates that more basic actions are needed.

The existing federal system to ensure a safe food supply is fragmented, characterized by a maze of often inconsistent legal and regulatory requirements implemented by 12 different federal agencies. Of the 12 agencies, 6 have major roles in carrying out food safety and quality

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activities. This structure necessitates extensive coordination to minimize duplication of effort, prevent gaps in regulatory coverage, and avoid conflicting actions. However, as might be expected, coordination has sometimes broken down, allowing unsanitary and other unsafe conditions to persist in some food processing plants. (GAO/RCED-91-19A, GAO/RCED-91-19B, and GAO/RCED-92-152.)

Our work has also shown that inconsistencies and illogical differences between the agencies' approaches and enforcement authorities undercut the system's effectiveness. How frequently a food processing plant is inspected and what actions are taken to enforce food safety standards are determined not by a unified, comprehensive assessment of the risk that specific food products pose to public health, but rather by the legislation that governs the responsible agency. For example, under current federal law, federal inspectors must examine each meat and poultry carcass slaughtered—about 7 billion annually—and visit each of the approximately 5,900 meat and poultry processing plants at least once during each operating shift. For most other foods, however, the frequency of inspections is not mandated; thus, the inspection rate for foods other than meat and poultry has slipped from an average of once every 3 to 5 years in 1992 to once every 8 years in 1994, to once every 10 years, according to current estimates. (GAO/RCED-94-110.)

Past efforts to correct deficiencies in the federal food safety inspection system have fallen short, in part, because they did not address the fundamental problems in the system. Agencies continue to operate under different regulatory approaches, have widely disparate budgets and staffs, lack the flexibility needed to respond to changing consumption patterns and emerging food safety issues, and are hampered by laws designed to address the food safety concerns that existed at the turn of the century, not those that our nation faces today. As we have previously reported, a new structure for food safety inspection and enforcement, based on uniform enforcement authorities and an assessment of the risk that food products pose, is needed. (GAO/RCED-92-152, GAO/RCED-94-192, and GAO/T-RCED-94-223.)

Federal regulations issued in July 1996 require meat and poultry plants to use a scientific system called Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) to ensure the safety of their products. The system will be phased in over an 18- to 42-month period, depending on the plant's size. The new regulations also require that meat and poultry slaughterhouses conduct microbial tests for E.coli (a general indicator of sanitary conditions) but

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do not require meat and poultry processing plants to conduct similar testing. Requiring HACCP and microbial testing is, without question, important in moving towards a more scientific approach, but it does not address the fundamental problem of multiple jurisdictions nor the inefficiencies caused by mandating the frequency of inspections for some products and requiring little or no inspection or testing of other products. No system will be foolproof but a scientific, risk-based approach would allow for more effective use of resources and ensure a safer food supply.

While our statement today is based on previous work, GAO is continuing to analyze issues affecting the food safety system. In particular, we currently are conducting a study of imported food safety for the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Likewise, we would be happy to work with the Senate Agriculture Committee as it continues its efforts to maximize the effectiveness of the nation's food safety system in protecting the public's health.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record.

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# Related GAO Products

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Food Safety: Information on Foodborne Illnesses ([GAO/RCED-96-96](#), May 8, 1996).

Food Safety and Quality: Who Does What in the Federal Government ([GAO/RCED-91-19A](#), Dec. 21, 1990).

Food Safety and Quality: Who Does What in the Federal Government ([GAO/RCED-91-19B](#), Dec. 21, 1990).

Food Safety and Quality: Uniform, Risk-Based Inspection System Needed to Ensure Safe Food Supply ([GAO/RCED-92-152](#), June 26, 1992).

Food Safety: Risk-Based Inspections and Microbial Monitoring Needed for Meat and Poultry ([GAO/RCED-94-110](#), May 19, 1994).

Food Safety: Changes Needed to Minimize Unsafe Chemicals in Food ([GAO/RCED-94-192](#), Sept. 26, 1994).

Food Safety: A Unified, Risk-Based Food Safety System Needed ([GAO/T-RCED-94-223](#), May 25, 1994).

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