

House Committee on Agriculture

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SUPERVALU INC. Written Testimony

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Good morning Chairman Peterson, committee members, ladies and gentlemen,

My name is John Hanlin, I am the Vice President of Food Safety at SUPERVALU. We are one of the largest grocery chains in the United States. I refer you to figure 1 of your packet. We are headquartered in Minnesota and operate over 2,500 retail stores, 35 distributions centers and employ over 190,000 people. Many of you may know us better by the banners under which we operate. These include ACME and Shaw's in the Northeast, Jewel/Osco in the Chicago area, Cub Foods in Minnesota, Albertson on the west coast, Save-A-Lot nationally and several others.

I am joined this morning by Mike Erlandson, SUPERVALU's Vice President for Government Affairs. We bring a unique perspective to the national discussion on improving the safety of our nation's food supply. I have almost 25 years experience working in the food safety area on both the manufacturing and retail aspects of the business. Prior to joining SUPERVALU, I worked for companies that included, Campbell Soup Company, The Pillsbury Company and General Mills. Mr. Erlandson spent 20 years working here in the nation's Capitol as Chief of Staff to former U.S. Congressman Martin Sabo from Minnesota.

As one of the largest grocery store chains, we must remove products from our shelves and our DC's almost daily due to food safety issues reported to us by USDA, FDA and food manufacturers. Consumers are losing confidence in our food supply and this has been highlighted in several public opinion surveys of recent.

We have entered a new age of food safety. Scientific advances in the fields of epidemiology, DNA fingerprinting of pathogens and good laboratory practices, are showing that the same bacteria that were traditionally associated with beef, poultry, eggs and pork are contaminating raw agricultural commodities. Several of the largest outbreaks of E. coli O157:H7 and Salmonellosis in recent memory have been associated with fruits and vegetables, e.g. spinach, last summer's outbreak due to jalapeno peppers and possibly tomatoes and most recently peanut butter.

If you refer to figure 2, as you well know, both USDA (right hand side) and FDA (left hand side) lead our food safety inspections systems. USDA has primary responsibility for meat, poultry and eggs products, while FDA has jurisdictional responsibility over everything else we eat.

In the past, this made sense given the historical association of food-borne illness with animals and poultry, a diet different than today's and a simpler supply chain. Currently inspection of meat and poultry is not always clear cut and sometimes a meat and poultry containing product is under FDA jurisdiction, not USDA inspection.

On figure 2, you'll notice several arrows going from right to left. Under some circumstances, meat, poultry and egg products move from USDA inspection to FDA jurisdiction depending on how the item is manipulated further down the manufacturing chain.

Figure 3 shows a frozen breakfast entrée comprising a sandwich with two side items. This product is under inspection of the USDA (mark of inspection on left hand side). However, a breakfast sandwich-only product (figure 4) is not under the inspection of the USDA. In figure 5 you see a steak Panini-style product. This product is fully enrobed by bread and is under USDA inspection; however in Figure 6 a similar steak Panini-style product more in line with a sandwich is not under USDA inspection.

Similarly in Figure 7, these cheeseburger sandwiches are not required to be inspected by the USDA nor bear the USDA mark of inspection. We show these slides to highlight the fact that all of these products generally carry the same (relatively low) food safety risk yet the inspection requirements vary differently. I'll come back to this notion of risk-based inspections in a moment as we offer some ideas on new approaches to risk-based inspection and a re-deployment of resources.

We need to modernize our food safety inspection and enforcement system. Consumers are changing their dietary habits – they're listening to the messages about the importance of increased consumption of fresh fruit and produce. Our scientists in Government, at Universities, in industry and those working for consumer groups understand how organisms traditionally associated with animals and birds can contaminate fruit and produce and make people sick.

Our supply chain grows in complexity - a few lots of a raw agricultural commodity when used as an ingredient in other products can contaminate hundreds of products representing millions of pounds of food.

Given all of these converging factors, we propose a refocus and re-alignment of our current food safety inspection systems. Specifically we propose taking the successful risk-based USDA surveillance, inspection and enforcement model that has helped reduce the incidence salmonella in poultry and has highlighted the challenges associated with reducing E. coli O157:H7 in ground beef and expanding to other agricultural commodities like spinach, and other leafy greens, tomatoes, fresh fruits, peanuts, pistachios, grains and other raw agricultural commodities. This is shown in figure 8. In other words expand USDA's risk-based inspection system to include commodities that today receive minimal inspection due to budget challenges at FDA.

What we propose in Figure 8 is to focus USDA risk-based efforts against improving the safety of all food commodities, particularly those commodities that are consumed in the raw state or those that are cooked or pasteurized and eaten without a further microbial inactivation step, e.g. peanuts, almonds, cooked chicken. We believe an approach like this – pushing food safety upstream in the supply chain will:

1. reduce overall public exposure to pathogens and thereby improve food safety.
2. provide greatest synergies in the implementation of good agricultural practices.
3. strengthen international competitiveness of US agriculture.

I'd like to go back for a minute and talk about redeployment of resources. This type of model would enable the Agency to deploy resource against the greatest food safety risks. Imagine for a moment being able to redeploy the FTE resource currently inspecting a facility making a frozen, fully cooked, cheeseburger sandwich (figure 8) and re-training the Inspector to inspect a peanut facility or a spinach farm just prior to the harvest.

We believe this proposed model would work if we, as a nation, create a single food agency or maintain dual jurisdictional responsibilities within USDA and FDA. In a dual role we would envision FDA providing the food safety leadership further down the supply chain, e.g. the manufacture of frozen pizza, entrees, canned soup, broths, sauces, snacks, seasonings, etc.

In closing we understand where our food safety risks are. We must look beyond the meat and poultry divide and focus on food safety systems across all categories of commodities using a risk-based approach. There is nothing more important than safe food to those of us in the food business and all of us as consumers.

Mr. Erlandson and I look forward to further discussions and all of us at SUPERVALU look forward to working with you to ensure that we prevent food-borne illness.

Thank you.