



Consumer Federation of America

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Consumer Federation of America Statement on Resignation of USDA Under Secretary Dr. Elisabeth Hagen

Consumer Federation of America regrets that Under Secretary for Food Safety Elisabeth Hagen has decided to leave the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Dr. Hagen's departure is a loss to the public. The Department of Agriculture plays a major role in assuring our food is safe and won't make us sick. USDA's Under Secretary for Food Safety is the highest ranking food safety official in government. Congress created the position and the Office of Food Safety in 1994 after USDA had failed to recognize the challenges of newly emerging pathogens such as *Campylobacter*, *Listeria monocytogenes* and *E. coli* O157:H7. The 1994 law recognized that meat and poultry inspection is a public health program and separated food safety from agricultural marketing functions within USDA, charging the Under Secretary with protecting public health.

Dr. Hagen, a Harvard Medical School graduate with specialized training in infectious disease, brought a new level of respect to the position. Under her leadership the USDA declared that any ground beef contaminated by six less well known but equally dangerous strains of pathogenic *E. coli* bacteria is adulterated and can't be sold. She guided the development of a brand-new performance standard for *Campylobacter* in raw poultry and updated the existing *Salmonella* standard. She encouraged cattlemen to move forward on development of on-farm food safety interventions such as an *E. coli* vaccine for cattle. And she proposed labeling of mechanically tenderized meat. The very presence of a person with her training in and commitment to public health helped USDA move ahead in dealing with foodborne illness associated with meat, poultry and egg products.

We urge the President to act quickly to identify and appoint a successor who is equally well qualified by training and by commitment to the primary purposes of the meat and poultry inspection laws. We remember and regret that the President delayed an unconscionably long time in filling this important position originally. Dr. Hagen wasn't sworn in until August 2010. Recognizing that there are powerful interests who want to keep meat and poultry inspection under the influence of the regulated industry, we urge the President to put public health first and protect American consumers.

The intent of the meat and poultry inspection laws is clear. We need leadership to make them real. We need an Under Secretary who is strong, competent and committed first to protecting public health. Finding the right person and getting him or her into the position quickly is important to everyone who eats meat and poultry products.

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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.