



Consumer Federation of America

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USDA Allowed State Meat Inspection Programs To Operate Even After Finding Cutting Boards Contaminated With Old Meat And Soot-Like Residues On Swine Carcasses.

Agency Permitted Substandard Inspection Programs To Operate For Years In Missouri, Wisconsin, Delaware, Minnesota And Other States.

STATEMENT OF CONSUMER FEDERATION OF AMERICA'S CAROL TUCKER FOREMAN

The USDA Office of Inspector General Audit Report on the quality of state meat and poultry inspection programs shows once again that these programs frequently do not protect public health. In the midst of a food borne illness outbreak from spinach, the OIG details stomach wrenching failures by some state inspection programs to meet the most basic sanitation standards and to protect the public from foodborne illness.

While FSIS reviewers found deficiencies in state programs and individual plants, the agency allowed the programs to continue operating for years, leaving consumers at risk every day.

The bottom line is consumers should be wary of purchasing meat products inspected by state governments. Look for the seal saying the meat was inspected by USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service.

Congress should drop proposed legislation that would allow meat from state inspected plants to be sold anywhere in the country and in other countries.

The OIG report issued today states that:

- FSIS visited 11 meat plants in Mississippi in October 2003. All failed to meet all HACCP requirements. FSIS reported that cutting boards in one plant were heavily contaminated with meat residues from the previous day's work, reported finding "soot-like" material on swine

carcasses, and noted that some plants failed to monitor cooking temperatures, potentially exposing consumers to bacteria that cause foodborne illness.

Despite these public health hazards, the Mississippi meat inspection program allowed these companies to continue operating and so did FSIS. In 2004, FSIS stated it had a clear responsibility to set a national standard for state inspection program but has failed to require states to meet the standard (Fulfilling the Vision, Initiative in Protecting Public Health, 2004).

■ FSIS allowed meat plants in four states --Missouri, Wisconsin, Delaware and Minnesota to continue to sell meat to unsuspecting consumers even after finding that the state programs were not meeting legal standards for safety.

In 2003 the FSIS reported Missouri's program "does not support at least equal to (federal inspection). Wisconsin has "significant concerns." The Missouri program was allowed to continue to operate for over a year while the state tried to address the problems found by FSIS.

OIG reported that FSIS has worked for years with Delaware and Minnesota to overcome problems with their programs.

From July 2005 to April 2006 FSIS initiated reviews of 16 state programs. FSIS could not rule the programs "equal to" but deferred action to let the state agencies fix problems. However, state inspected companies were allowed to continue to sell meat to an unsuspecting public.

The OIG issued similarly critical reports in previous years. Though FSIS is applying more resources to reviewing state inspection programs these reviews occur only every three years, are primarily devoted to FSIS looking at state paperwork and involve onsite visits to only a handful of plants to see if the programs work as intended.

USDA inspectors, sworn to uphold public health, visit federally inspected plants at least once each day, every day, every year.

The Federal Meat Inspection Act and Poultry Products Inspection Act permit states to run their own inspection programs if they are "equal to" the standards applied to federally inspected plants. However, products from these plants are not allowed to be shipped in interstate commerce. Congress is now considering legislation to allow meat and poultry from state inspected plants to be sold anywhere, cross state lines and be sold to foreign countries.

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Consumer Federation of America is a non-profit association of 300 consumer groups, representing more than 50 million Americans. It was established in 1968 to advance the

consumer interest through research, education and advocacy. The Food Policy Institute at CFA works to promote a safer, healthier and more affordable food supply. Carol Tucker Foreman is the Director of the Food Policy Institute and a former assistant secretary for the USDA.