

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 18, 2018

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write today regarding the just released United States Government Accountability Office report (GAO-18-272), entitled “USDA Should Take Further Action to Reduce Pathogens in Meat and Poultry Products”. This report, which we requested, reviews the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) approach to reducing pathogens in meat and poultry products and makes a number of recommendations that, if implemented by your agency, would help reduce foodborne illness nationwide. We urge you to act expeditiously to adopt the GAO’s recommendations.

The average American consumes around 200 pounds of meat in a given year. One in six people in the United States will become sick due to contaminated food, and *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* alone cause two million illnesses each year. While our food safety system has dramatically improved in recent years, there are still many preventive actions that can, and should, be taken to further strengthen our ability to prevent and respond to this public health problem.

Due to our long-standing concerns regarding foodborne illness in the U.S., we requested an audit be conducted by the GAO in July 2015. We asked the GAO to examine the USDA’s pathogen standards for meat products and identify any additional steps that can be taken to address ongoing food safety challenges. This report, released today, highlights several areas where we can improve upon the current system for monitoring, preventing, and responding to pathogens such as *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in our food supply.

The agency in charge of overseeing the food safety mission of the department is the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS), and we are encouraged by the possibilities of such new technologies such as whole genome sequencing in fulfilling the food safety mission of this agency and the Department of Agriculture. We respectfully ask that you respond in writing to the following questions by May 7, 2018:

1. While FSIS has developed pathogen standards for several types of meat products that are widely consumed, there has been significant delay in implementing new standards for additional products such as turkey breasts and pork chops. Will the agency identify acceptable pathogen levels for these widely available products, and if so, what is the timeframe for development of these standards?

2. The GAO report notes that USDA does not currently have a process in place for deciding which food products shall be considered for new standards. Will USDA be formalizing a process by which emerging food safety risks are analyzed and appropriate actions taken? What does the department consider an acceptable timeframe for implementing new pathogen standards, from the identification of a problem all the way through issuing new standards or updating old standards?
3. The GAO report finds that, while USDA does have guidelines regarding the effectiveness of on-farm practices for controlling pathogens in poultry and beef cattle, it does not have the corresponding guidelines for hogs. When will USDA be developing guidelines regarding on-farm practices for controlling pathogens in hogs?
4. What is FSIS doing to fully utilize new technologies, specifically whole genome sequencing, in our food safety system? What actions has the department taken since the October 2017 public meeting on this issue, and what future actions are planned, both as part of the interagency strategic plan and otherwise?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter, and we look forward to your response. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

Sincerely,


Dianne Feinstein
U.S. Senator


Richard J. Durbin
U.S. Senator


Kirsten Gillibrand
U.S. Senator