

US Department of Agriculture pushes for weaker rules on poultry industry

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20 December 2012

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is preparing to implement new rules for the poultry industry that will mean up to a fivefold increase in production line speeds. The rules will also turn over quality control monitoring currently done by USDA inspectors to employees of the poultry companies, at a cost of 1,000 jobs of federal inspectors. The USDA announced the plan last January with the intention of finalizing it by the end of the year, after a pilot program involving 20 plants.

Currently, line speeds are limited to 35 chickens per minute. The new rules will allow speeds of up to 175 birds per minute—almost 3 per second. The opportunity for workers to visually inspect the carcasses is effectively eliminated. USDA inspection, which now is maintained at three inspectors per production line, is cut to a single inspector at the end.

The measures will save the federal government \$90 million over the next three years, and even more significantly, will cut up to \$500 million per year in production costs for the industry. Industry advocates call the new rules a long-awaited “modernization” of the poultry-inspection system.

Elisabeth Hagen, the USDA undersecretary for food safety, explains, “There’s a role for visual inspection, but in this day and age it can’t be the only way that we define inspection for food safety. We’re not doing the right thing by the consumer if we do that.” USDA officials claim that reducing the number of inspectors will somehow allow those left to use more-scientific methods to screen the chickens.

Federal poultry inspectors insist that at the speed the new rules will allow the lines to go, bruises, blisters, tumors, puss, broken bones, and other indications of a bird that is unfit to market will not be seen. Contaminants that can be seen on inspection of the

entrails won’t be caught.

Stan Painter, chairman of the National Joint Council of Food Inspection Locals, told McClatchy News, “The rule continuously talks about how much money per pound the plants are going to save by going into this process. Why the hell is an agency concerned about the money that the plant’s going to save? I realize that’s a stakeholder, but our focus should be food safety.”

The planned USDA program goes by the designation of HIMP, for “HACCP-Based Inspection Models Project.” HACCP stands for hazard analysis and critical control points, a preventive approach to food safety developed in the 1960s under the auspices of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to regulate the production of foods for space flights. The concept behind HACCP is to monitor potential hazards that can lead to the production of unsafe foods during the process rather than simply relying on a final inspection to detect it.

“The modernization plan will protect public health, improve the efficiency of poultry inspections in the US, and reduce spending,” Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack stated earlier this year. “The new inspection system will reduce the risk of foodborne illness by focusing [USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service] inspection activities on those tasks that advance our core mission of food safety.”

There is an Orwellian ring to the packaging of the HIMP program by USDA officials. The claim that the inspection system is being improved by slashing the number of federal inspectors and speeding up the lines is ludicrous. The statements of industry spokesmen are even more preposterous.

National Chicken Council spokesman Tom Super told the press, “Look at the data. This is not something that USDA cooked up overnight. This has been in a pilot

program for 13 years.” He touted the food-safety and worker-safety records of the 20 broiler-chicken “trial plants” to test the proposal since 1999.

“Chicken companies and their employees on this line have every incentive to not let a product with a quality defect into the marketplace,” Super said.

Poultry plant workers are among the lowest paid of production workers and often have disincentives to report or take action when there is an issue with the product. Speeding the production lines will only exacerbate that problem.

In a public statement opposing the HIMP plan, the group Food & Water Watch said, “USDA inspectors receive extensive training to protect public health in poultry facilities, but there is no similar requirement for company employees to receive training before they assume these inspection responsibilities in the proposed privatized inspection system.... A recent Food & Water Watch analysis of a pilot program for these cuts found an appalling amount of defective and unsanitary poultry contaminated with feces, bile and feathers got through.”

Phyllis McKelvey, a now-retired federal inspector, worked in one of the pilot facilities. She posted a petition on a web site called change.org that said, in part: “[Under HIMP] inspectors can no longer see all parts of the bird, which causes them to overlook contaminated chicken and turkey with lesions, bruises, and tumors.... The jobs that highly trained inspectors once did are now handed over to untrained workers at the poultry plant. The workers don’t have the power to question their supervisors. The overwhelming speeds of the lines result in more worker injuries.”

“People need to have an opportunity to question some of these results and different things that the agency is coming up with in regard to the safety of this program,” said Amanda Hitt, director of the Food Integrity Campaign, which encourages industry whistleblowers. She added, “We’re listening to the people that are actually doing [the inspections] and they’re saying unequivocally the traditional inspection produces higher quality and safer poultry.”

The USDA’s plan is motivated not by a desire to develop a more effective inspection system, but by the overriding drive of the ruling elite to cut government spending and boost corporate profits. The recent outbreak of salmonella has focused public attention on

the lack of regulation of food companies, yet the response indicated by the so-called HIMP plan expresses a complete disregard of the public good.



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