



Union of Concerned Scientists

Citizens and Scientists for Environmental Solutions

Driving the Fox from the Henhouse

Improving Oversight of Food Safety at the FDA and USDA

September 2010

Survey Essay Excerpts

Special-Interest Pressure

“The use of 'risk' and 'economic impact' as factors in driving food safety enforcement are means by which the mission to protect the consumer have been watered down in favor of the industry. As a result, the agency has on numerous occasions found itself on the wrong side in public opinion since the public does not see food safety and health as 'risk based' but wants a safe product, PERIOD.”

–FDA employee

“One of the most serious flaws in the FDA's ability to ensure food safety is lack of appropriate statutory authority. The regulated industry has a large role in stifling efforts to give the FDA the statutory authority it needs.”

–FDA employee

“Stop treating the industries we regulate as customers, stakeholders and partners. We regulate them, they are regulated by the FDA. Period. The FDA must get back to the mission of protecting the American consumers!”

–FDA employee

“Food safety has succumbed to the higher priority of global corporate profits.”

–FDA employee

“There is tremendous amounts of inconsistencies from one establishment to another, not only from one district in the U.S. but within a specific district. Some companies have more lobbyists than others and seem to be held to lower standards than others.”

–USDA employee

“If they curtail the influence by corporate powers, they will wind up with a more fair and more effective system. Corporations have far too much influence in all areas of government including this agency.”

–USDA employee



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“I have seen multiple instances where the best science is suppressed to avoid making government agencies look bad. It has not been business groups or consumer groups suppressing the best science, but high ranking career employees.”

–*USDA employee*

“By not allowing the food industry to have such a large influence on the agency decision making.”

–*USDA employee*

“Many producers only care about their “bottom line“ and true concern for public safety is secondary—not in speech or written word, but in action.”

–*USDA employee*

Political Interference in Science

“The political upheavals every 4 years are more detrimental to the protection of the public health than any other outside influence. The Secretary, as a political appointee, is in no way capable of conducting an appropriate response to food safety issues . . .”

–*FDA employee*

“This agency could be a great agency but we are too top heavy with senior people more interested in keeping jobs by "creating" good numbers for Congress than asking for better laws, more enforcement capability, and less time by Investigators being rotated through other jobs that the agency feels are urgent.”

–*FDA employee*

“People who don't "tow the line" or "go along" are neutralized and are not allowed to have much influence. If you want to advance, you must support agency positions.”

–*FDA employee*

“Scientists need the time to be able to conduct long-term, high-risk research without fear of penalty or jeopardizing promotion potential.”

–*USDA employee*

“Research should be kept separate from policy/regulatory aspects of food safety. If a single food safety agency contains both, there will be no way to stop political interference with science.”

–*USDA employee*



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“First of all, remove FSIS from USDA...it's like having the fox in charge of the hen house. Any action we try to take has to pass industry scrutiny and the impact on the bottom line...inspectors in the field lose every time because the bureaucrats at District level and above will not support any action that goes against the wishes of the industry.”

–USDA employee

“Many times establishments will and do complain to the local congressmen/woman and too often they tend to side with plants without hearing the agency's position or inspector's position on the matter. Typically once a member of congress gets involved the agency does whatever it can to make the situation go away rather than address food safety issues.”

–USDA employee

“Any Senator/Congressman who calls USDA to get us off a constituent's back should be reported to their Ethics Committee. We are on someone's back for GOOD reason, Public Health, and that should be enough reason to let us do our job properly.”

–USDA employee

“Senior officials should have opportunities and be encouraged to work more closely with peers from other agencies, industries and academia. All sectors need the resources to work as teams, rather than as competitors for the same resources.”

–USDA employee

“Make it truly science based and not political science based.”

–USDA employee

“Food safety is being compromised by business and political influences and lack of thorough science-based decisions.”

–USDA employee

FDA Resources Are Inadequate

“FDA is far too small of an agency. We need to be 3 or 4 times bigger to be effective in food safety by inspection activity. There is constant pressure on field employees to take on ever more responsibilities.”

–FDA employee

“I have been at FDA my entire career and I can say most of the people are trying to do a good job. We are buried by the ever expanding workload, and previous administrations that did not support our mission.”

–FDA employee



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“Our greatest weakness in food safety, by far, is imported food. Better targeting of exams and sample collections will help, as will the current focus upon increased quality assurance at the facilities of foreign suppliers; but the overall resources available at FDA and devoted to import operations are far too small to adequately address the problem.”

–FDA employee

“The agency is trying to improve food safety, but it takes a lot of money to implement a fully functional system. Congress needs to provide more money and allow for stronger regulations if they want to create a system that will reduce the number of food-borne illness outbreaks.”

–FDA employee

“FDA needs sustained support from Congress in order to function properly. It seems FDA gets 2 good years of funding after a particularly bad stretch of regulatory failures, then 2 years later the cycle of static or decreased budgets start again.”

–FDA employee

“Funding for more employees. We don't have enough people to keep up with the demand. There is so much more food being imported from around the world that we can't regulate at the source.”

–FDA employee

“FDA resources dropped significantly over the last administration, losing many seasoned, dedicated professionals. We are rebuilding our staff.”

–FDA employee

Some Foods Are Riskier than Others

“We need to spend more time looking at Imports. FDA currently looks at 1% of all imported entries.”

–FDA employee

“The import system relies on shippers and importers self declaring critical information into a computer system to gain entry into the country. If you tweak (lie a little) on your entry, the computer won't know and better and allow entry.”

–FDA employee



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“In my opinion, the current system of inspecting some food product that is still in import status after it has arrived at initial destination there leaves too much possibility product can be tampered with/substituted/become adulterated between the time it arrives at initial destination and when FDA might inspect at that location. Inspecting/analyzing product directly at the borders in its observed original import condition in my opinion is the most effective/proper way to assess safety of the import food supply, from a public health standpoint.”

–*FDA employee*

“Need more hands on inspection and monitoring because small issues are common in poultry plants. The facilities sometime put profits above preventive maintenance.”

–*USDA employee*

“Updating the outdated meat, poultry, egg products statutes and regulations. The statutes have not kept pace with science and technology . . . Congress focuses on the brush fires and not the food safety systems.”

–*USDA employee*

Recommendations

“Establish HACCP requirements for all domestic food processors, and importers of food products regulated by the FDA. Use the existing seafood and juice HACCP regulations as a template. This will help to insure pro-active action by industry both domestic and foreign. FDA sampling of end products for food safety is statistically not very effective.”

–*FDA employee*

“Whistleblower protection needs to be improved. The Office of the Inspector General refuses to guarantee protection for people who lodge complaints. Respect by management for current and future union contracts will help improve conditions all the way up and down the line. Better funding of congressionally-mandated initiatives, and replacement of antiquated equipment and computer systems. The people are more than willing but the system itself needs to be rebuilt to help them.”

–*FDA employee*

“Based on the idea of ‘from farm to fork’ a trace back system and a HAACP plan should be evaluated by the FDA using the European Commission model and oblige the industry to apply them in order to decrease the risk of food borne illnesses.”

–*FDA employee*



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“Eliminate redundancies within FDA. Increase the size of the inspection force. Recruit talent (people with food knowledge) - including more scientists to enhance research efforts and/or work more closely with academia to accomplish this.”

–*FDA employee*

“Increase resources for more international inspection, more sample collections at the entry points, and enforce the law.”

–*FDA employee*

“Mandatory recall authority; farm to table regulations; increased targeted risk-based inspections that are based on signals and science, not on congressional mandates for inspection numbers or performance goals; stronger emphasis on prevention.”

–*FDA employee*

“We need one food agency.”

–*FDA employee*

“Separate FSIS from USDA. The USDA has conflicting goals with FSIS. The USDA is geared towards promoting agriculture while FSIS is set up to assure food safety. I don't think those two things can go together.”

–*USDA employee*

“Rethink HACCP. Recognize that the same agency that supports agriculture cannot be the same agency that regulates it. This bipolar approach to government does not work and never has.”

–*USDA employee*

“To increase the safety of our nation's food supply, the inspectors and in-plant personnel who actually do the day to day inspection and verification would have to be further trained to understand all of the nuances of the regulations and their authority.”

–*USDA employee*

Other Topics

“FDA needs to get back to actually BEING a science-based organization. The number of political appointees sky-rocketed during Bush II. The only political appointee in FDA should be the commissioner, everyone else should be there because they will make science based decisions (not political) with the public in mind.”

–*FDA employee*



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“FDA scientists often become the agency expert in a certain topic and stay in that role for years, even if they are no longer effective, or are actually obstructionist. Single individuals should not be the sole agency experts in particular areas of expertise. This fosters turf protection and failure to collaborate.”

–*FDA employee*

“We need more FLEXIBILITY in what we analyze for . . .”

–*FDA employee*

“FDA shouldn't take so long to take action against a company that has obviously violated compliance laws.”

–*FDA employee*

“Will the government really get its act together in the area of food safety in my lifetime???”

–*FDA employee*

“Are the 77,000,000 cases of food poisoning, and 5,000 food poisoning deaths per year, just the “cost of doing business” for the food production and distribution industry? That does appear true to me.”

–*FDA employee*

“This agency is good at starting change (writing new HACCP and SSOP regulations), but it is not good at finishing change (deploying people with the education in science to implement them.”

–*USDA employee*

“Our agency has also dumbed down their field inspectors. What I mean by this is that we use to be trained and instructed to perform hands on processing tasks and labeling tasks. These tasks are now considered non-food safety by the agency and have been relegated to low priority. . .”

–*USDA employee*

“I think there is a lot of pressure being put on the smaller companies (testing) to control different types of bacteria that is out of their control. I also feel this agency is using to many chemicals to control pathogens, such as E-coli 0157:H7, and not focusing on proper dressing procedures at the slaughter houses. The focus should be prevention not controlling.”

–*USDA employee*



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“There is little or no attention paid to the daily work done and the daily needs at the grass roots level of food inspection. ... I would not be allowed to make a statement like this to any public agency or express this in writing as an editorial to be published. This is sad, but very true.”

–USDA employee

“No agency can be a substitute for an intelligent and vigilant consumer.”

–USDA employee

“If this gets out I will most likely lose my job. The truth sometimes hurts you.”

–USDA employee

“Because it is impossible to have inspectors present at all phases of food production, the burden of producing safe food must fall on the producers. The sheer volume of food to be inspected falls on relatively few inspectors with little time and little technical backup to do the job.”

–USDA employee

“I feel like the agency as a whole does not focus on a specific problem.”

–USDA employee

“We have worked as an agency on Salmonella for years, and there is as much Salmonella in poultry as ever before.”

–USDA employee

“The agency does have the ability to resolve the issues, but we are not focused with all of our scientific efforts.”

–USDA employee