Letter to The Editor: Better food safety through science, not emotions

By Food Safety News Readers on July 1, 2019

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

When the Washington Post, members of Congress, and 35 other organizations [1] raised concerns about a proposed modernization of a food safety and inspection process, we needed to provide a scientific perspective to the issue. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) proposed a regulation called the New Swine Inspection System (NSIS). The Washington Post article claimed the “Pork industry soon will have more power over meat inspections” and Congress has threaten to withhold appropriations because of increased line speeds as a result of implementing the NSIS.

The National Association of Federal Veterinarians (NAFV) supports the proposed NSIS. NAFV’s members constitute the nation’s largest block of scientific and technical expertise in the area of food safety and slaughter inspection and have determined the new system will enable a more scientific basis for ensuring food safety for the public.

On Jan. 19, 2018, FSIS announced its continued effort to modernize inspection systems through science-based approaches to food safety. USDA has proposed to amend the federal meat inspection regulations to establish a new inspection system for market hog slaughter establishments called the New Swine Inspection System (NSIS), while also requiring additional pathogen sampling for all swine slaughter establishments [2].

The NSIS places more emphasis on the critical control points for contamination and uses microbiological testing in addition to visual inspection to ensure slaughter processes are producing safe foods. The new system does not relinquish any “power” to slaughter plants, FSIS will have all the same authorities to enforce food safety standards as before. The NSIS is a major step forward in improving the slaughter inspection systems of the U.S. to provide safe food to the public. Increased line speeds and the impact on plant employees will be monitored by the Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) which has that jurisdiction. Line speed are set and adjusted for optimal efficient food safety inspection and worker safety precautions. FSIS sets the cap based on industry standards and outcome of inspections.

On April 8 this year FSIS released a response to the article, condemning it for false reporting. Specifically, FSIS clarified that only federal inspectors perform meat inspections and will continue to conduct 100 percent ante-mortem inspections and 100 percent carcass-by-carcass inspection at post-mortem. The agency will make staff determinations on a case-by-case basis and will not be decreasing inspectors by 40 percent. Under the proposal, establishment employees sort market hogs before FSIS inspection, which is consistent with current policy for establishments under traditional inspection.

[1] https://www.farmprogress.com/usda/comment-new-swine-slaughter-inspection-system-through-april-2

2 https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2018/01/19/usda-announces-proposed-rule-modernize-swine-inspection

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About the author: Dr. Joe Annelli, DMV, is executive vice president for National Association of Federal Veterinarians (NAFV), following 32 years as a federal veterinarian in the USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. He worked in a variety of jobs including section VMO, national swine epidemiologist, staff veterinarian, senior staff veterinarian, chief staff veterinarian, director of emergency programs, and director of the One Health Coordination Center.

Annelli graduated from the Araneta University College of Veterinary Medicine in the Philippines and completed his senior year of clinical rotations at the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine. He was in private practice briefly in Knoxville, TN, and Brooklyn, NY. He completed a graduate program at the University of Minnesota’s College of Veterinary Medicine in swine medicine, veterinary epidemiology and public health.

The NAFV, founded in 1918, is recognized by the USDA as the representative organization for federally employed veterinarians and as an association of managers and supervisors.