



U.S. Wants All Meat Held Until Tests Prove Safety

New USDA Rule Could Prevent Up to 25,000 Cases of Food Poisoning, Vilsack Says

By DEVIN DWYER and BRIAN HARTMAN

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The [Obama administration](#) today said it plans to order all U.S. beef, pork and poultry producers to keep their products off store shelves until government tests for pathogens prove the food is safe.

Until now, producers have been free to ship raw cuts of potentially contaminated meat and chicken to market before tests yield their results. The result has been inadvertent and preventable [outbreaks](#) of disease and costly [recalls](#).

Agriculture Secretary [Tom Vilsack](#) today said, "Most establishments already do their own testing and holding of products," and many of the industry's largest producers, including Tyson Foods and Cargill, support the rule.

"We've had test and hold procedures in place at our plants for about ten years," said Tyson spokesman Gary Mickelson. "While we don't typically favor more government regulation, we believe it makes sense in this case to mandate 'test and hold' for the whole industry."

But some smaller companies have opposed the change, saying they have a limited ability to refrigerate thousands of pounds of perishable goods while they await test results.

"It's challenging for some companies that are small or very small producers because they might not have the capacity to hold the product," said Janet Riley, a spokeswoman for the American Meat Institute, an industry group that favored the stepped-up inspections.

"We think holding the product while you await test results makes sense. It prevents recalls. And it's prudent from a food safety perspective," she said.

Vilsack said the new requirement to "test and hold" would prevent up to 25,000 cases of food sickness per year. He estimated 44 major recalls could have been prevented if the policy had been in place between 2007 and 2009.

The USDA says it inspects "billions of pounds" of meat, poultry and processed eggs every year, and conducts periodic tests for dangerous bacteria at meat plants and processing sites around the country.



Pigs on a factory farm in Missouri.

But the agency has waited years to make the "test and hold" policy mandatory -- despite repeated requests from the American Meat Institute and other groups to impose a uniform rule.

"I think we should be focused on why are we doing this today as opposed to why wasn't it done before,

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because we think it's the right thing to do," said Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Elisabeth Hagen, when asked why it has taken so long to make it mandatory.

Salmonella Outbreak from Turkey

The USDA announcement comes amid a fresh [outbreak](#) of [salmonella](#) poisoning from turkey burgers in 10 states.

A drug-resistant strain of the bacteria has infected 12 people, including three who have been hospitalized, the CDC reported Monday.

The USDA announced a recall of nearly 55,000 pounds of frozen turkey burgers from Jennie-O Turkey last week after they were linked to illnesses in Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Washington and Wisconsin.

"I don't think this policy would have necessarily prevented those illnesses," said Hagen of the new "test and hold" requirement and the ongoing turkey burger recall. "But I think it will prevent illnesses in the future."

The new USDA policy won't take effect for at least a few months while terms of the regulation are finalized.

An estimated 48 million Americans, or one in six, get sick from food poisoning every year, according to the CDC. Of those, at least 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die.



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