

**Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of
Government
Management, Restructuring, and the
District of Columbia**

Testimony Given by:

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Good morning. My name is Harold DeVries and I am Vice President and a principal stockholder at Mallquist Butter and Egg Company in Rockford, Illinois. My company is a small agricultural business packaging about 4 million eggs per week from its one-half million laying chickens. We also distribute liquid, frozen, and dried eggs. In addition, my company is involved in the distribution of butter and cheese. I am here today at the request of Senator Durbin's office.

I appreciate the opportunity to present my views today. Let me begin by saying that food safety is very important to me personally, to my company, and to my industry. The reputation of my company is dependent on quality and we operate quality assurance programs to ensure a safe food supply. Mallquist Butter and Egg Company has instituted procedures to identify those critical control points from farm through distribution for monitoring quality assurance, including cleaning and disinfecting the poultry house, rodent and pest control, proper egg washing, biosecurity, and refrigeration.

In addition to those measures my company performs to enhance the safety of our food products, I am active in my national association, United Egg Producers (UEP), which has taken the initiative in the development of programs and activities to be responsive to government and

consumer concerns on food safety. Just to mention a few activities, UEP has been instrumental in:

1. Establishing a *Salmonella enterica* Serovar Enteritidis (S.E.) Task Force
2. Securing \$3.4 million annually from Congress for S.E. Pilot Project
3. Calling for chicken breeder testing through the National Poultry Improvement Plan
4. Proposing and lobbying for passage of a National Refrigeration Law
5. Recommending that liquid pasteurized egg products be used in institutions serving immuno-suppressed persons who are at higher risk of severe illness, such as hospitals and nursing homes.
6. Developing a A5-Star@ Total Quality Assurance Program for use at the farm level
7. Sponsoring Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) workshops for the egg production and processing industries
8. Publishing egg handling and preparation guidelines for food service establishments

The egg industry through UEP and the American Egg Board have been involved in many other activities as well. Today, I wanted to share information about food safety actions in the State of Illinois to demonstrate the degree of awareness of the problems in foodborne illnesses and the activities on the state and local levels.

Foodborne illnesses are a significant problem affecting the public's health. Everyone in the food distribution system from producer to processor to transporter to preparer to consumer has a significant role to play in the safety of the food supply. **Consumer confidence, both actual and perceived, in the safety of the final food product depends in large degree on knowledge.**

With the issue of food safety of such paramount importance, former Illinois Governor Jim Edgar charged the state's departments of Agriculture and Public Health to convene a task force to analyze food safety issues likely to confront Illinois in the 21st century and to recommend actions to resolve public concerns.

This task force was chaired by Becky Doyle, then the state's agriculture director and John Lumpkin, M.D., M.P.H., the state's public health director. I also served on the task force since eggs have become the poster child for food safety issues. Other members of the task force included academics, the legal profession, meat and poultry processors, restaurants, food retailers, local health departments and the public. The task force met five times between December 2, 1997 and October 2, 1998 to address its mission.

Purpose of Illinois Food Safety Task Force

The task force identified four areas for study:

1. Review the food safety chain from farm to table, e.g., food production, transportation, processing, sales and service, and consumption.
2. Identify the problems and barriers to safer food in Illinois, addressing such issues as
 - (1) effectiveness and efficiency
 - (2) communication
 - (3) duplication of services
 - (4) statutory authority
 - (5) adequacy of resources
 - (6) regulatory structure
 - (7) education and training requirements
 - (8) federal and national food safety guidelines
3. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the current Illinois food safety system.
4. Define problems identified, develop creative solutions and make food safety recommendations to the directors of the departments of Agriculture and Public Health.

Foodborne Illness: A Public Health Problem

During fiscal 1998, local health departments in Illinois investigated almost 1,200 complaints about food and illness. The microorganism that caused the foodborne outbreaks could only be determined in one third of the incidents. Two thirds of the outbreaks occurred because of unknown causes. Food service establishments, restaurants, cafeterias, and delis, accounted for 57% of the sites where outbreaks were reported. Proper handling and preparation of food, both in and out of the home, is a critical step in preventing disease.

While the causes and effects of foodborne diseases are better understood today, emerging risks need to be monitored. For example, consumers are changing; increasing numbers of elderly and immuno-suppressed persons are at higher risk of severe illness; consumers spend less time cooking than ever before, and may have received less instruction on food handling at home or school.

Current Illinois Food Safety System

Where the rubber meets the road is at the local level. More than 90 Illinois local health departments and 135 municipalities provide preventive food safety functions at the community level through inspections of restaurants, schools, caterers and food stores for

adherence to food safety requirements. They promote safe food handling behaviors through educational efforts with schoolchildren, the general public and the retail food industry. Public health agencies, both state and local, investigate complaints, monitor developments that emerge as potential threats to food safety for the population of Illinois and investigate foodborne illness outbreaks and recalls to identify the source and thereby prevent the spread of illness and injury.

The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDA) exercises its food safety authority through preventing and eradicating animal disease, monitoring livestock slaughter, and inspecting meat and poultry wholesale processing. IDA also regulates refrigerated warehouses, oversees egg grading and quality, and verifies accuracy of weights and measures.

The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) has the responsibility for inspecting food processing plants and warehouses for all the remaining non-meat and poultry products, defining rules for operating retail level food establishments, providing training and standardization of local health department food inspectors, and reviewing local food safety programs for compliance with state standards.

I noted these responsibilities by these agencies to demonstrate the wide range of activities that directly affect the food supply.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

There are a number of areas that can be strengthened to enhance the safety of our food supply. Additional monetary resources are necessary at the state and local levels for regulatory activities and to provide educational opportunities addressing food safety issues. Food safety regulations are not uniformly applied or enforced through the system. In addition, basic and applied research into microbes that cause foodborne illnesses and into the mechanisms by which they contaminate our foods and cause outbreaks, as well as emerging pathogens. The HACCP system is widely accepted by the scientific community as the best known approach to enhancing the safety of foods. If HACCP systems are fully implemented, the effectiveness of the food safety system can be enhanced significantly, but **absolute safety of potentially hazardous foods cannot be assured.**

Recommendations of the Task Force

Food safety is the responsibility of numerous and diverse stakeholders. Therefore, partnerships between industry, government and the public provide the links necessary to build a coordinated and cohesive framework for action. Partnerships can improve efficiency and provide a mechanism for the exchange of information and data. With partnerships come the interaction and communication necessary to promote cooperation and collaboration between government regulatory agencies and industry. Partnering among stakeholders also can serve to integrate regulated activities with important non-regulatory components such as education and training activities.

The first recommendation from the task force is to broaden coordination and cooperation between the Illinois agencies with the respective federal and local counterparts so that food safety programs are consistent and uniform. Partnerships between regulatory agencies

can establish a framework to ensure that regulation and enforcement are effective and consistent, and that resources are adequate and appropriately allocated throughout the system.

The second recommendation is for the development of a mechanism to ensure that regulated industries, government agencies and the general public have a formal venue to advise the departments of Agriculture and Public Health on issues of mutual concern relative to the food supply.

Allowing partners a forum for sharing information and raising concerns has been recognized as an effective tool for raising awareness about regulatory developments and for developing and maintaining procedures for the industry.

The task force also recognizes the value of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Foodborne Disease Active Surveillance Network (Foodnet). **In the last 3 years, as reported by FoodNet, the incidence of Salmonellosis associated with Salmonella enteritidis has decreased 44%. This is great news for the egg industry and the public. It suggests that efforts by the industry are having an effect.** In Illinois, the participation in the FoodNet system is seen as essential in the improvement of the foodborne illness surveillance system.

Conclusion

The egg industry has demonstrated responsiveness and cooperation with federal, state and local agencies in addressing the safety of shell eggs and egg products. A large number of agencies are involved in food safety. However, the expertise from these agencies address the issue of food safety from different and complementary perspectives. The egg industry has developed numerous programs and activities designed to enhance food safety and to educate the channel from farm to table in the proper production, transportation, processing, handling, and preparation of its products.

Education and training can be one of the least costly yet most effective means to protect consumers against foodborne illness. Increasing individual awareness of food safety matters all through the food chain and motivating consumers to adopt simple, yet important sanitation and food handling behaviors is effective in improving food safety.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today and explain what is taking place on the state level relative to food safety and how the egg industry is taking the initiative in developing programs to enhance the safety of its shell eggs and egg products. Thank you.