

Inspection of Food: Who's Responsible?

Local, state, federal and international agencies all have a role in ensuring food safety and quality in the United States. These agencies regulate the use of chemicals and technology based on scientific research and testing. Food and food processes are tested beginning at the farm, through storage and processing, and finally at the market. Some monitor only one kind of food, such as milk or seafood. Some work strictly within a specific geographic area. Others are responsible for only one type of food establishment, such as restaurants or meat-packing plants. Together, these agencies make up the U.S. food safety team.

Federal Agencies

The four major federal agencies that have a role in the food safety regulatory system are the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS).

Food & Drug Administration: It is FDA's job to see that all domestic and imported foods marketed in interstate commerce (except for meat and poultry products) are safe and wholesome. Feed and drugs for pets and farm animals, cosmetics, and medicines also come under FDA scrutiny. FDA also ensures that products are labeled truthfully with the information that people need to use them properly.

FDA investigators and inspectors visit more than 15,000 facilities a year, seeing that products are made right and labeled truthfully. If a company is found violating any of the laws that FDA enforces, FDA can encourage the firm to voluntarily correct the problem or to recall a faulty product from the market. A recall is generally the fastest and most effective way to protect the public from an unsafe product. When a company can't or won't correct a public health problem voluntarily, FDA has legal sanctions it can bring to bear.

Food Safety & Inspection Service: FSIS seeks to ensure that meat and poultry products are safe, wholesome and correctly marked, labeled and packaged if they are transported out of state. FSIS also shares responsibility with FDA for the safety of intact-shell eggs and processed egg products. States are responsible for the inspection of meat and poultry sold in the state where they are produced, but FSIS monitors the process and will assume responsibility if a state fails to do so.

Environmental Protection Agency: EPA licenses all pesticide products distributed in the United States and sets standards on the amount of pesticides that may remain on food. The 1996 Food Quality Protection Act requires the EPA to consider the public's overall exposure to pesticides (through food, water, and in home environments) when setting the standard for pesticide use on food. EPA is also responsible for protecting against other environmental, chemical and microbial contaminants in air and water that might threaten the safety of the food supply.

National Marine Fisheries Services: NMFS conducts a voluntary seafood inspection and grading program that checks mainly for quality. Seafood is the only major food source that is both "caught in the wild" and raised domestically. Quality and safety standards vary widely from country to country and inspection of processing is a challenge because much of it takes place at sea. Mandatory regulation of seafood processing is under FDA and applies to exporters, all foreign processors that export to the United States and importers.

Other Agencies: The Agricultural Marketing Service, Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration, and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service of the USDA oversee the USDA's marketing and regulatory programs.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the Department of Health and Human Services engages in surveillance and investigation of illnesses associated with food consumption in support of the USDA and

FDA regulatory missions. The Federal Trade Commission, through regulations of food advertising, plays an indirect role in food safety regulations.

Several other federal agencies have smaller but important regulatory responsibilities in food safety. For example, the Department of the Treasury's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is responsible for overseeing the production, distribution and labeling of alcoholic beverages. The department's Customs Service assists other agencies in ensuring the safety and quality of imported foods through such services as collecting samples.

State Agencies

Three of the primary state agencies responsible for food safety inspections in South Carolina are S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), the S.C. Department of Agriculture, and the S.C. Meat and Poultry Inspection Department.

DHEC: This agency has the responsibility of ensuring that food prepared for retail sale in restaurants and grocery stores is safe. DHEC provides training to assist retail establishments with information regarding food safety and makes inspections to determine the level of compliance.

South Carolina Department of Agriculture: The South Carolina Department of Agriculture regularly conducts statewide inspections of food and cosmetic manufacturers, warehouses, storage and transportation facilities, and food salvage operations. Labels for foods and cosmetics manufactured or sold in South Carolina are subject to review and approval. Consumer complaints dealing with foods and cosmetics are investigated.

The Laboratory Services Division performs over 100,000 analyses per year on food samples gathered from around the state to determine safety, quality and conformance to standards of identity. The samples come from food outlets throughout the state and are tested for such things as pesticide residues, microbial contaminations, mycotoxins, vitamins, minerals, label

guarantees, adulteration and misrepresentations. Foods tested include raw fruits and vegetables, frozen desserts, producer milk, ground meats, enriched foods, canned goods, honey, syrup, grains, and a variety of other foods.

S.C. Meat & Poultry Inspection: The mission of this department of the Clemson Livestock-Poultry Health program is to protect the health of consumers by providing a comprehensive inspection service to assure that meat and poultry products are safe, wholesome and accurately labeled.

All processing plants must have sanitation standard operating procedures and are routinely evaluated using a performance-based inspection system. Microbiological monitoring is an essential feature of the inspection program. Food supplies are monitored for adulteration of animal tissues and antibiotics, sulfonamides, pesticides, and a variety of toxic chemicals.

Sources:

1. US. FDA (September 1998). Food Safety: A Team Approach. [WWW document.] URL <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~lrd/foodteam.html>
2. US. FDA (January 1999). The Food and Drug Administration: An Overview. [WWW document.] URL <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/fdaoview.html>
3. National Research Council. Ensuring Safe Food From Production to Consumption. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998.

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Food Safety Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University; T.W. Brooks, S.C. Dept. of Agriculture; E. O. Dufford, S.C. DHEC; and D.E. Lafontaine, S.C. Meat-Poultry Inspection Department. (New 12/99.)

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