



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

FEB 12 2013

Mr. J. Patrick Boyle
President and Chief Executive Officer
American Meat Institute
1150 Connecticut Avenue, NW.
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Mr. Boyle:

Thank you for your February 11, 2013, letter expressing your concerns about the impact sequestration would have on the federally inspected meat and poultry industry. We agree that furloughing Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS or Agency) employees, including our food safety inspectors, would have an adverse impact on both those employees and the American public. Unfortunately, unless Congress acts to prevent sequestration, FSIS will have no choice but to furlough its employees in order stay within the budget Congress has given it.

The Department as a whole has planned extensively on how to address sequestration and has taken all feasible actions to mitigate its impact. As part of this proactive approach, FSIS has undertaken numerous efforts to reduce its operating costs, including streamlining projects, strategic sourcing of procurement contracts, and other innovations.

Also, in anticipation of sequestration, the FSIS Administrator directed the initial fiscal year 2013 budget allocations to be reduced across program areas—making cuts in travel, training, conferences, and other operating expenses—and continued to limit hiring of non-front line staff. These proactive cost-saving initiatives enabled the Agency to decrease the potential number of furlough days required to meet the sequestration target by almost half.

Because we understand that furloughing our food safety inspectors would not be good for our consumers, the economy, the meat and poultry industry, or our workforce, we view such furloughs as the last option we would implement to achieve the necessary sequestration cut. However, were sequestration to become a reality, it simply would not be possible for FSIS to achieve the requisite level of savings by furloughing non-front line staff alone as your letter suggests. Equally important, most components of the FSIS team, whether at the district offices or in the field, are integrated and dependent on each other for the proper inspection of meat and poultry products. Suggesting that one portion of the Agency can be considered separate and distinct from the other does not take this integration into consideration.

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Please rest assured that we consider furloughs the least desirable option for us to achieve the reductions Congress mandated through the Budget Control Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-25.) You are correct in your assertion that FSIS' governing statute imposes an obligation on the Department to provide inspection. However, our view of those authorities is that they allow for furloughs in order to comply with budget and fiscal laws enacted by Congress. Unlike other budget scenarios, such as a short-term government shutdown, the exemption provisions of the sequestration statutes do not include exceptions that would be applicable to FSIS inspection activities.

Thank you for expressing your thoughts on sequestration. The impact on USDA's food safety activities is only one of many reasons why it is critical for you to join me in urging Congress to act promptly to prevent sequestration from going into effect.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Vilsack", written in a cursive style.

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary