



DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

SEP 25 2013

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2413 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515-0703

Dear Congresswoman DeLauro:

Thank you for your August 23, 2013, letter regarding the Food Safety and Inspection Service's (FSIS) Public Health Information System (PHIS). I share your passion for ensuring food safety and protecting the public health, and I welcome the opportunity to address your concerns.

Both FSIS Administrator Al Almanza and I are committed to considering and addressing challenges that FSIS field personnel experience using PHIS, particularly problems related to PHIS network connectivity. Administrator Almanza has assigned an FSIS taskforce to analyze these challenges and develop solutions so that field personnel, the front line in protecting public health, are able to do their jobs more efficiently.

Like you, I believe that a 21<sup>st</sup> century information technology system, like PHIS, is an important component in enhancing USDA's food safety infrastructure and processes. As you noted, from late afternoon, Thursday, August 8, to early morning, Saturday, August 10, FSIS inspection personnel were temporarily unable to access PHIS because the PHIS database server was locked out by a Microsoft software flaw. Working with Microsoft, this issue was resolved and a software patch was installed to prevent similar occurrences from happening.

From late August 8 to early August 10, no contaminated product left a facility while the system was down, and food safety was not compromised. FSIS inspectors are present at each establishment, each shift, every day to verify that product being produced is safe. Their activities include inspecting product, equipment, and processes visually, verifying plant records, and collecting product samples for lab testing. PHIS itself neither inspects nor prohibits the inspection of food. FSIS inspectors have been trained to carry out food safety inspections regardless of the status of PHIS.

PHIS is a modern system that is helping FSIS target and focus food safety tasks and is assisting us in protecting the public health. PHIS supplements inspectors' work; however, inspection does go on without PHIS. Documentation of inspectors' work can be done on paper until PHIS is restored. Inspectors also do not need PHIS to take regulatory action in an establishment; they can write noncompliance reports and, if necessary, initiate enforcement action without access to PHIS.

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During the last 3 full months preceding the August problem, PHIS availability, including system and network maintenance and deployment of new releases, was over 99.9 percent—99.9922 percent in May 2013; 99.9424 percent in June 2013; and 99.9722 percent in July 2013. Industry standard availability typically ranges from 99.67 percent to 99.99 percent. For the rare instances when PHIS is unavailable, FSIS inspectors are expected to perform verification procedures and document results, and enter those results into PHIS when the system becomes operational. No reduction in real-time verification of production practices occurs, and only documentation within PHIS is delayed.

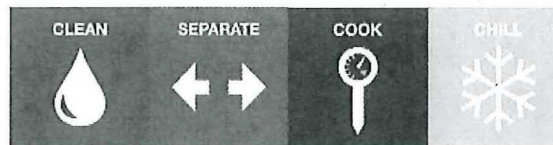
You also raised concerns about sampling and PHIS functionality. FSIS's verification of the entire production process, including sampling, determines whether a product is safe and allowed to enter commerce. FSIS does not sample every lot of product, and samples are collected many times over the course of a year. While PHIS being inaccessible did result in the collection of fewer samples, this occurred for a brief period of time and did not impact food safety because other inspection tasks continued uninterrupted. FSIS laboratories have standard operating procedures in place to allow for sample receipt, analysis, and reporting to take place should PHIS be unavailable. A sample can be received and processed with no delay. Reporting of positive results takes place electronically, via FSIS' new Laboratory Information Management System-Direct, and a fax/e-mail option is available as well.

Thank you again for your letter. If you have further questions, or if we can be of additional assistance, please contact Ann Wright, Acting Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, at (202) 720-7095.

Sincerely,



Elisabeth A. Hagen, M.D.  
Under Secretary  
Food Safety



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