Worker Safety Agency Squawks, USDA Balks (full-blog/2014/9/26/worker-safety-agency-squawks-usda-balks)

Agriculture (full-blog/category:Agriculture)

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On July 31, 2014, the United States Department of Agriculture ("USDA") released sweeping reforms to the United States poultry industry. Tom Vilsack, Agriculture Secretary, stated that "sound science" would help reduce foodborne illnesses by approximately 5,000 incidents per year.

The endeavor began in early 2012, when the USDA proposed changes to the food inspection procedures at poultry processing facilities for the first time since 1957. The proposed rule would have also reduced the number of USDA food inspectors by roughly forty percent, while simultaneously increasing the maximum number of chickens that could be processed per minute from 140 to 170.

Labor activists cried "fowl," citing dangers already associated with workers' repetitive motions at poultry processing plants. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health ("NIOSH") conducted a study to identify health hazards at a chicken processing plant in South Carolina and found forty percent of the employees had symptoms of carpal tunnel.

In fact, the USDA cited this report to support its proposal and created an embarrassing administrative dispute between the two federal agencies. In a letter addressed to the Administrator of the USDA from the Director of NIOSH, John Howard stated, "The Food Safety and Inspection Service Administrator's blog entry stated that NIOSH 'made several recommendations to improve worker safety at this facility, but downplaying the extremity line speed was not among them.' This statement is misleading." The comment period for the proposal ended and the USDA submitted a final copy to the White House sealed from the public. This drew even more criticism.
After more than 175,000 comments and input from the Department of Labor, the USDA revealed the final regulation signed by President Obama on July 31, 2014. The regulation reduced the number of food inspectors but maintained the current limit of 140 birds to be processed each minute. "It will pull federal inspectors off the processing line, ensuring that carcasses caked in blood, guts, and feathers whir by at the rate of 2.3 bird per second," crowed Rena Stienza, a spokesperson for Center for Progressive Reform, who went on to warn of the danger of "Big Chicken." However, Vilsack says the regulation "proposes stricter requirements on the poultry industry and places our trained inspectors where they can better ensure food is being processed safely."

The timing of the final regulation came on the heels of a Centers for Disease Control report concluding Foster Farms, one of the industry's largest producers, was the epicenter of a salmonella outbreak that ultimately affected 634 people in 29 states and Puerto Rico. As Americans gobble more turkeys and the statistics flock in, only time will tell if these new regulations will indeed prove effective.


Id. at 4433.


Id.


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