



MAR 19 2001

Joby Warrick
Washington Post
1150 15th St., N.W.
Washington, DC 20071-0002

Dear Mr. Warrick:

Thank you for your inquiry regarding the safety of meat and poultry products. We are happy to work with you and hope that the materials and background we have supplied have been helpful.

As a result of the implementation of a new food safety and inspection verification approach that requires meat and poultry plants to take measures to control microbial pathogens and other hazards (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point systems), the nation's food supply is safer than ever. Under HACCP, raw meat and poultry products are being microbiologically tested. Our data shows the level of harmful bacteria has been markedly reduced on raw meat and poultry nationwide, and the CDC has indicated a dramatic drop in the number of illnesses associated with these products. The system has drawn the support of consumer groups, the meat and poultry industry, academia, and newspaper articles.

The Washington Post highlighted this in its March 17, 2000 article: "Two years after a federally mandated meat and poultry inspection system went into place, the number of Americans stricken by the most common forms of food-borne illness has declined by almost 20 percent...."

While efforts by FSIS and industry have been successful in reducing the levels of pathogens on meat and poultry products, raw meat is not sterile. Therefore, all raw products are required to carry a safe handling label.

The label states that "some food products may contain bacteria that could cause illness if the product is mishandled or cooked improperly." The label reminds food handlers to:

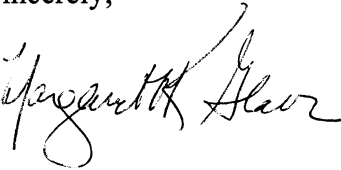
- Keep product refrigerated or frozen. Thaw in refrigerator or microwave;
- Keep raw meat and poultry separate from other foods. Wash working surfaces (including cutting boards), utensils, and hands after touching raw meat or poultry;
- Cook thoroughly;
- Keep hot foods hot, refrigerate leftovers immediately or discard.

Raw meat products shipped to the Sizzler restaurants associated with the outbreak in Wisconsin in July and August, 2000 carried such a label. Wisconsin health officials concluded that poor employee hygiene and unsafe handling practices caused contamination of the salad bar, which then sickened patrons of the restaurants.

Clearly, every step in the farm to table continuum is important in preventing foodborne illness. That is why FSIS is participating with other government agencies, consumer organizations and others, in efforts to educate not only consumers but also food service workers. One such collaborative effort is the USDA/FDA Foodborne Illness Education Information Center, which includes a database of videos, software, course books, posters and brochures to teach restaurant food handlers how to handle food safely and prevent foodborne illnesses.

Food safety is a top priority of USDA, and the Department will continue to take the appropriate steps, working with other federal and state agencies, as well as interest groups, to strengthen our nation's food safety system.

Sincerely,



for Thomas J. Billy
Administrator

Attachments:

- Safe Handling Label
- Final Report: Investigation of an Outbreak of Gastrointestinal Illness at the Mayfair Road Sizzler Restaurant, Wauwatosa, WI; July-August, 2000
- Final Report: Investigation of an Outbreak of E. coli O157:H7 Infection at the Layton Avenue Sizzler Restaurant, Milwaukee, WI; July-August, 2000
- news clippings