

## CONGRESSMAN LARSON CALLS CUTS IN FOOD SAFETY FUNDING A SERIOUS HEALTH CONCERN

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CONCERNWASHINGTON - U.S. Congressman John B. Larson (CT-01) today stated that food safety protections for Connecticut's poultry and meat industry would be "severely weakened" by proposed funding reductions in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service. The House is expected to vote on the USDA's fiscal year 2001 budget bill, which contains these funding reductions, this week.

"I have long been a defender of what I call the "kitchen table issues" that concern Connecticut residents, such as the high cost of prescription drugs, and the rising prices of heating oil and gasoline. Well, you can't get much more "kitchen table" than the food we eat. When it comes to the inspection and safety of food, this is much more than a simple budgetary matter. This is a matter of preventive healthcare, and it is a serious health concern," said Larson.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that there are 939,000 illnesses caused by food borne agents in Connecticut every year, 16,064 hospitalizations and 64 deaths. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services projects that the reported incidence of food-related disease may increase by 10 to 15 percent during the next decade.

The Clinton Administration has been fighting hard to support the funding for USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service due to recent food-related illnesses around the country. For example, a severe outbreak of salmonella food poisoning left a Chicago physician dead, made 30 of his friends ill, and closed an Evanston, Illinois catering business in February. In March, federal health officials confirmed that salads packed with boxed meals shipped to Chrysler, Jeep, and Dodge dealerships were responsible for cases of food poisoning in more than 300 dealership employees. Most recently, in May at least 41 people in California, Oregon, New Mexico, Nevada, and Washington became ill from cantaloupes tainted with salmonella bacteria.

To cover the costs of basic inspections to poultry and meat processing plants, the fiscal year 2001 proposal would require the Food Safety and Inspection Service to reduce assistance for state-run meat and poultry inspection systems, or cut back on inspections of imports or on laboratory operations, or take other problematic steps. Therefore, the improvements and initiatives that the Administration had proposed--such as risk assessment studies, upgrades to egg safety, and expanded collaboration with state and local food safety programs--would be almost impossible to achieve under the proposed USDA budget appropriation.

The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture allotted \$674 million for food safety and inspections for fiscal year 2001, which is \$14 million below the Clinton Administration's request. Last year, Connecticut received \$1.67 million from USDA to conduct food safety inspections.

In addition to the inadequate appropriation for the Food Safety and Inspection Service, Larson noted that the bill falls short in other food safety areas within the Agriculture Department. For example, it fails to provide for a systematic program of testing fruits and vegetables to assess levels and patterns of microbiological contamination, and it fails to provide requested funds for food safety research.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), food-related illnesses affect millions of people every year in the United States. The CDC estimates that 76 million people become ill, 325,000 are hospitalized and 5,000 die each year from food that contains microbes and toxins. Food-related diseases are caused primarily by bacteria, viruses, parasites, and fungi that produce toxic substances in food.

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For additional information on the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, check the following website:  
[www.fsis.usda.gov/index.htm](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/index.htm)

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