

## **USDA to Overhaul Poultry Inspections for First Time in 50 Years**

MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration is overhauling poultry plant inspections for the first time in more than 50 years, a move it says could result in 5,000 fewer foodborne illnesses each year.

Final rules announced Thursday would reduce the number of government poultry inspectors by around a fourth. But those who remain will focus more on food safety than on quality, requiring them to pull more birds off the line for closer inspections and encouraging more testing for pathogens. There would also be more inspectors checking the facilities to make sure they are clean.

The changes would be voluntary, but many of the country's largest poultry companies are expected to opt in.

Federal law requires that government inspectors be present in poultry processing plants. Right now, many USDA inspectors stand in one place on the production line and check for visual defects. This doesn't do much to ensure the birds are safe to eat, since common poultry pathogens like salmonella and campylobacter are invisible. The new rules would better train inspectors to find hazards in the plant and would also require the companies to do more testing for pathogens.

USDA originally proposed the rule in January 2012, saying the reduction in inspectors would save companies and taxpayers money while also decreasing pathogens in the food supply. Consumer groups have said an overhaul is necessary but criticized that proposal, saying it would shift too much of the inspection burden to the industry.

The final rule abandons a controversial part of the original proposal that would have allowed companies to increase the speeds of processing lines in the plants. USDA said that increasing line speeds wouldn't affect food safety, but consumer groups argued it could make it harder to detect obvious contamination and harm worker safety.

Salmonella and campylobacter are commonly found in poultry and the two top foodborne pathogens that make people sick in the United States. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that salmonella causes around 1.2 million illnesses in the United States every year, including 450 deaths.

There have been several large outbreaks of salmonella in poultry in recent years. In July, California-based Foster Farms issued a recall after salmonella illnesses had been linked to their products for more than a year. That chicken has been linked to 621 illnesses in 29 states and Puerto Rico so far.

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In 2011, an outbreak of salmonella linked to ground turkey products sickened 136 people and killed one, prompting a recall 36 million pounds of meat.

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