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Retired USDA Inspectors Share Concerns About HIMP Project

By [Carey Gillam](#) on November 16, 2015

Joe Ferguson says he just couldn't take it any longer. The former inspector for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) spent more than 23 years monitoring operations inside pork processing plants inspecting hog carcasses for signs of anything that could translate to a food safety problem, in particular hints of *Salmonella* contamination on the processing line. But Ferguson, who retired in September 2014, is now a so-called "whistleblower," joining forces with critics who say that a trial high-speed hog processing inspection program piloted by USDA is a food safety nightmare. Critics charge that the faster line speeds and fewer numbers of government inspectors on processing lines called for by the program result in carcasses flying by too fast for inspectors to spot signs of trouble. Five U.S. hog plants are participating in the USDA's Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) Inspection Models Project (HIMP), including three owned by, or contracted to supply, Hormel Foods Corporation. The program is supposed to provide for a more flexible and efficient inspection system. Processing line speeds can run roughly 20-percent faster than at conventional plants, allowing for the processing of approximately 1,300 hogs per hour. The program gives plant operators more responsibility for carcass inspection while government inspectors verify the effectiveness of the company's work. "In my opinion, the only standards they were concerned about meeting were the standards that the company had for production," Ferguson told **Food Safety News**, referring to a key Hormel supplier in Austin, MN, which has become a particular target of critics. An [undercover video](#) recently shot inside that plant, privately owned by Quality Pork Processors Inc., was released Nov. 11 by an animal rights group. The video, coupled with allegations from food safety activists, has thrust concerns about pork processing into the national spotlight and is prompting a probe by USDA. Made by a worker

for the nonprofit animal rights group Compassion Over Killing, the video includes footage of pigs being beaten and dragged, and they are shown writhing on a conveyor belt as their throats are slit at the slaughterhouse. The group said the video shows that pigs with feces and pus-filled abscesses are being processed for human consumption with a “USDA inspection seal of approval.” The video also shows a supervisor who appears to be sleeping at a time when the animal rights group said he was supposed to have been working.



Photo from an undercover video taken inside a pork processing plant in Austin, MN.

Quality Pork Processors, which provides more than 50 percent of Hormel’s fresh pork raw materials needs and processes roughly 19,000 hogs a day, said in a [statement](#) that it was making “significant corrective measures” in response to the video. Many of these measures are being mandated by Hormel, both companies noted, and include enhanced compliance oversight and increased third-party auditing at Quality Pork. Hormel is also placing “humane handling officers” at the pork plant. In a [statement](#) posted Nov. 12, Hormel said that the company was “extremely disappointed and concerned to see the recently released undercover video detailing instances of aggressive animal handling and employee insensitivity at one of our supplier facilities. These actions do not reflect the values of Hormel Foods, its employees or its customers.” Meanwhile, a USDA spokesman said that the federal agency is investigating activities seen in the video for possible violations of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. “The actions depicted in the video under review are completely unacceptable, and if we can verify the video’s authenticity, we will aggressively investigate the case and take appropriate action,” USDA said in a statement. “Had these actions been observed by the inspectors, they would have resulted in immediate regulatory action against the plant.” The [Food Integrity Campaign](#), a program of a whistleblower group called the Government Accountability Project (GAP), said that the video shows only part of the problems. Ferguson and at least one other now-retired USDA inspector have come forward with concerns about conditions at the hog plant which they believe threaten public health. The inspectors have witnessed line speeds moving so fast that it’s nearly impossible to detect abscesses, lesions, fecal matter and other defects that may make the hog

carcasses unsafe or unwholesome, the group said in a statement. Plant employees cannot safely report food safety problems or slow down the processing lines without fear of retaliation, and USDA inspectors are only allowed to conduct inspections on a small sample of hogs which doesn't reflect the true pathogen risk, GAP said. "Inspectors have told us what's been happening in this Hormel plant. It's not surprising that where food safety concerns appear, other areas of concern like animal welfare and worker safety arise as well," said Amanda Hitt, director of the Food Integrity Campaign. Hitt's group raised similar concerns in January when it said that affidavits obtained from Ferguson and three other USDA inspectors noted increased contamination problems in the HIMP plants. A similar program is also in place at U.S. poultry plants, and a labor union representing U.S. poultry inspectors has claimed that the program jeopardizes food safety. Hormel, known for its Spam luncheon meat and Jennie-O, Muscle Milk and Dinty Moore brands, referred questions about the effectiveness of the HIMP process and related concerns about food safety to USDA. USDA defended the HIMP program and said that it is not to blame for the actions seen in the video. The agency added that its own analysis shows that the HIMP hog plants are performing as well as, or better, than plants operating under traditional inspection processes. Under the HIMP market hog inspection system, there are two to three online carcass inspectors and one offline verification inspector assigned to each processing line. At the traditional hog plants, there are typically seven online carcass inspectors and one offline verification inspector. But USDA said that in the HIMP plants, government inspectors perform 1.4 times more offline verification inspection procedures than occur in non-HIMP hog plants. And HIMP establishments have lower levels of non-food safety defects, equivalent or better *Salmonella* testing results, and fewer positives tests for chemical residues, the agency noted. Pat Maher, another retired FSIS inspector with 30 years of experience, told **Food Safety News** that he is not totally opposed to the HIMP inspection model, but he does think the faster line speeds are a problem. "It is too fast, way too fast for me to get a good look at things, that's for sure," Maher said. (To sign up for a free subscription to **Food Safety News**, click [here](#).)

Tags: [Amanda Hitt](#), [Carey Gillam](#), [Compassion Over Killing](#), [food safety](#), [Government Accountability Project](#), [HACCP](#), [HIMP](#), [Hormel](#), [Hormel Foods Corporation](#), [Humane Methods of Slaughter Act](#), [Joe Ferguson](#), [Pat Maher](#), [pork processing](#), [Quality Pork Processors Inc.](#), [undercover video](#), [USDA](#)



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