



## FOOD/WATER SAFETY



# USDA's Alfred Almanza: Spring forward with food safety!

by Dan on Mar 21, 2016 • 11:10 am

*Spring is finally here. That means more sun and warm weather, but also extra public health precautions — especially when it comes to keeping your food safe.*

*Public Health Newswire caught up with U.S. Department of Agriculture Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Alfred Almanza to talk about the food safety-public health relationship, how food safety has changed over the years and how USDA is joining APHA during National Public Health Week.*

**Q: You've been at FSIS for 38 years. How has the way food inspectors protect public health changed since you began your career?**

A: I've seen many changes in my time with FSIS. I can say from personal experience that when I first started, FSIS was much more focused on visual inspection and less on the science-based aspects of protecting public health than it is now. While carcass-by-carcass inspection remains the cornerstone of our work, FSIS has embarked upon efforts to modernize our inspection and processes, placing a greater emphasis on public health. The first major change was the adoption of the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point final rule. This rule required that establishments analyze their processes, identify the hazards reasonably likely to occur, and put controls in place to prevent the occurrence of those hazards.

The modernization of poultry slaughter inspection brought HACCP concepts to slaughter plants and is another great advancement in food safety. In addition to the optional New Poultry Inspection System, the poultry slaughter requires, for the first time, that all poultry slaughter establishments perform their own microbiological testing at two different points to demonstrate they are controlling for pathogens that cause illness, like *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. Poultry establishments now have to meet new control requirements for these bacteria, and when the poultry slaughter modernization rule is fully implemented, an estimated 5,000 illnesses will be prevented each year. Previously, America had been relying on a poultry slaughter inspection model that dates back to 1957. The new system allows our inspectors to better use their time and ensure that food is being processed safely.

Another significant change I've seen in my time with FSIS has been the shift from paper to data with the Public Health Information System. This new system allows the Agency to collect and store all Agency data about inspection, pathogens, and other Agency activities, in one central location. This is important because our inspection program personnel and analysts can use this data to identify trends and respond by directing their efforts in ways that will result in meaningful improvements in public health.

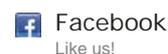
**Q: Spring is here, which brings warmer weather, outdoor activities — but also food safety risks. What steps should consumers take to stay safe as the equinox begins?**

A: I am definitely excited about the warmer weather, but it's important to remember that bacteria like the warmer weather, too. Bacteria grow faster in warm weather, so extra steps need to be taken to prevent food poisoning. When you're preparing food, make sure to keep your hands clean, separate raw meat and poultry from ready-to-eat foods, and always use a food thermometer. When you're serving food, especially outdoors, make sure to keep



Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Alfred Almanza .  
Photo by USDA

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track of the time. Perishable food should not sit out for more than two hours. If the weather is above 90 °F, don't let the food sit out for more than one hour.

About one year ago, USDA launched the FoodKeeper app to help combat food waste. But more than that, it offers valuable storage advice about more than 400 food and beverage items. It even offers cooking advice on foods like meat, poultry, and seafood. When you're spring cleaning this year, don't leave out your pantry and refrigerator. You can use the FoodKeeper to help you decide what to keep and what to throw out. The app is available for [Apple](#) and [Android](#) devices.

I always like to make sure people are aware of the resources FSIS offers consumers if they have questions about food safety. We recently celebrated the 30 year anniversary of the USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, which enables consumers to ask questions or report incidents of foodborne illness. The Hotline receives more than 80,000 calls each year and helps prevent foodborne illness by answering questions about the safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat, poultry, and processed egg products. The experts on our Hotline offer such a wealth of knowledge to consumers, and they are a huge resource to FSIS. The Hotline is available for calls, emails, and live chats Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. ET. Consumer can call 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) or visit [AskKaren](#) to speak with a food safety specialist.

**Q: National Public Health Week, which is fast approaching, elevates the importance of public health nationwide. How do your approximately 9,000 employees bring us toward this year's NPHW theme, [building the healthiest nation by 2030](#)? And how will you celebrate NPHW?**

Earlier this year, we finalized the first ever pathogen reduction standards for chicken parts. Eighty percent of chicken that Americans consume is in the form of parts. These new standards, along with our new standards for comminuted poultry, should help to prevent an estimated 50,000 foodborne illnesses and help us meet our Healthy People 2020 goals. As we move forward, our focus on modernization has us looking at ways to modernize pork and beef slaughter.

We are also laying the groundwork for continued modernization in the years ahead as we develop our new five-year Strategic Plan. Building on this theme of modernization, we are strengthening our use of science. We are seeking to expand our use of Whole Genome Sequencing technology, which will provide FSIS with a much better understanding of what it means when we find pathogens in the products we test. With Whole Genome Sequencing and improvements in analytics, we will be able to respond more quickly and more effectively to foodborne outbreaks should they occur.

FSIS is looking forward to participating in National Public Health Week as a federal partner with CDC, FDA, and EPA. We are planning to promote and participate in the National Public Health Week Twitter chat. Along with APHA and many of our shared public health partners, we plan to focus on building healthier lives for at-risk populations that are at a higher risk of foodborne illness and other diseases.

As a public health agency committed to achieving excellence, FSIS continuously tracks performance, modernizes methodology, and applies science-based approaches to the work that we do. I know first-hand the hard work that dedicated men and women do each day to ensure that we have the safest food supply in the world. Because of this work, millions of Americans enjoy safe and wholesome meals each day.

**Tags:** food safety, USDA

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