

## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

January 31, 2012

Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary,

While I applaud your efforts to modernize poultry inspection in the United States, I am writing to urge you to reconsider expanding the USDA pilot program, HACCP-Based Inspection Models Project (HIMP). As you know, HIMP allows plant personnel, rather than USDA Inspectors, to initially determine which carcasses and parts are unacceptable and removed from the production line. My concerns stem from a 2001 GAO report that raised several uncertainties surrounding the program and at the same time offered several improvements. I recommend addressing those issues prior to expanding HIMP beyond its current status as a pilot program.

I recently requested a follow-up GAO study of the plants currently enrolled in HIMP to address a broad array of concerns, ranging from food safety to worker safety, as line speeds in some facilities have increased to over 200 birds per minute. While I understand that USDA employees will continue to inspect each bird, I am concerned that such line speeds will result in contaminated carcasses being missed during the inspection process. I understand and agree that cost-saving and efficiency are important to both USDA and the industry, but we cannot trade the safety of consumers and/or workers for this improved efficiency without certainty.

As you are well aware, the American public depends on the federal government to oversee the safety of the U.S. food supply. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 48 million foodborne illnesses occur each year in the United States, resulting in 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths. Of these, *Salmonella* is the most common infection, accounting for 1.2 million illnesses annually. The CDC actually reported a lack of progress in reducing infections caused by *Salmonella*, particularly when compared to other common causes of foodborne illness, such as *E. coli*. While causes of Salmonellosis outside of the poultry industry occur regularly, the pathogen is commonly found in poultry and outbreaks are often associated with poultry or its products.

I know USDA along with the poultry industry strives to ensure the food we consume is safe; however, given the statistics I outlined above, I do not believe USDA should yield inspection responsibilities to plant personnel that have an inherent conflict of interest unless HIMP can be independently verified to be safe and effective. This can only be done with further analysis, including the GAO report I have requested, and I urge you to allow for such a study prior to expanding HIMP to the majority of poultry processing facilities in the United States.

Sincerely,



Kirsten E. Gillibrand  
United States Senator