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NEW JERSEY

COMMITTEES:  
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# United States Senate

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February 26, 2008

The Honorable Ed Schafer  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Schafer:

Yesterday, several weeks after your department issued an administrative hold and several days after the USDA issued a recall on beef from a California packing plant, the State of New Jersey announced that more than 170 school districts have received the recalled meat products in question. It is presumed that New Jersey children have consumed the beef.

From the inspection standpoint, there are a number of issues about which I have grave concern. Primarily, I am very troubled that the inspection process itself did not catch the problems in this plant and that it took the undercover video of animal rights activists to expose extensive and pervasive violations. I worry that this plant is only the tip of the iceberg and that these violations are manifestations of an inspector shortage and inadequate oversight that leave consumers extremely vulnerable to salmonella, E. coli, and other bacteria.

I am also concerned about the slow pace of public communication about this matter. The administrative hold you placed on the beef in question was made on January 30. While it was reported in the press and communications were made to schools, the seriousness of the problem did not really get wide attention until the beef recall was issued on February 17. Many did not realize that New Jersey's children were served this beef in schools for almost a month after the initial exposure of the plant violations. Children are among the most vulnerable groups to the affects of food poisoning, and therefore, any delay in notifying schools about a meat recall is troubling. New Jersey parents undoubtedly share these same concerns.

I ask that you immediately provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the normal inspection process for meat from a plant such as the one in question?
- Why was it not discovered in time to prevent the need for the nation's largest-ever beef recall?
- Are you satisfied with the inspection procedure for this particular plant and are you satisfied with USDA food inspection procedures across the board?
- How does the USDA determine whether an administrative hold should become a recall?

- How does the communications chain work so that states, consumers, grocers, and food purveyors know when potentially tainted food has reached their doors?
- In New Jersey, why was the public not made more aware of the potentially tainted beef at the schools until nearly a month after your initial recall?
- How can we better educate people about the difference between a hold and a recall?
- Do food processing plants have any requirements to continually track where their meat is sold and served? Would such a requirement have quickened the pace of notification in this process?

It seems to me that there are serious flaws all along the food inspection chain – from the professionals who should have caught the violations at this plant before such a large-scale recall to the officials in charge of notifying the public about local deliveries of the beef. I am relying on your answers to confirm that notion or inform me otherwise, so that we can best help prevent future food safety issues like this one. I thank you in advance for your response.

Sincerely,



ROBERT MENENDEZ  
United States Senator