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April 20, 2000

FDA/Dockets Management Branch (HFA-305)
Docket No. 98-045N3
5630 Fishers Lane, rm. 1061
Rockville, MD 20852

Re: Egg Safety Action Plan; Public Meetings
Docket No. 98-045N3
65 Fed. Reg. 15119 (March 21, 2000)

AARP appreciates this opportunity to submit additional comments on the Egg Safety Action Plan, requested in conjunction with two public hearings convened by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The goal of the Egg Safety Action Plan is to develop a comprehensive approach to minimize, if not eliminate, the contamination of eggs and egg products with *Salmonella Enteritidis* (SE). The development and implementation of an effective Egg Safety Action Plan is a high food-safety priority for AARP, since SE poses a particularly serious threat to older persons and other susceptible populations.

In our previous comments on the Egg Safety Action Plan, submitted in September 1999, we stressed the importance of a multi-part approach to controlling SE contamination, which would combine processing, storage, and transportation controls with product labeling and education of both food retailers and consumers. We urged FDA and FSIS to base any processing controls on a system employing the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) approach. An egg HACCP plan should include on-going, on-farm testing and control measures because the farm is where initial contamination begins. Other measures that should be part of an effective SE strategy include a mandatory expiration date for shell eggs, a ban on repacking and redating of old eggs, mandatory refrigeration of eggs throughout the food chain, and mandatory safe-handling labels on egg cartons. AARP believes that given existing, cost-effective technologies and strategies, full elimination of egg-related SE illnesses by 2005 is a reasonable goal.

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In these additional comments, we will focus on three issues. First, AARP wishes to emphasize the importance of including in the safe handling instructions a reference to the fact that raw or undercooked eggs may contain "harmful bacteria" or "bacteria that cause illness." There is apparently some pressure from the egg industry to remove that reference. We believe that it is absolutely essential that consumers know why they should safely handle and prepare eggs. Only by understanding the potential health risk posed by raw and undercooked eggs and egg products will consumers be motivated to follow the handling instructions on the label. Effective safe handling instructions must also include both an "informational statement" (of risks of contaminated eggs) and an "instructional statement" (of ways to reduce the risk). The safe handling instructions for meat and poultry products include mention of bacteria, and there is no reason to treat labeling of raw eggs and raw egg products any differently.

Second, we urge FDA to seriously consider making mandatory the current Food Code provisions that apply to eggs. In its current form, the Food Code consists of model requirements to be followed by food establishments at the retail level. Codifying the relevant Food Code provisions would ensure that consumers in every state are afforded uniform protection against SE contamination in eggs.

Third, AARP agrees that both the Federal and State governments have a role to play in combating SE in eggs and egg products. While it makes sense to give the states primary responsibility for on-farm enforcement of SE-control plans, the relevant standards to be enforced by the states must be established by the Federal government, which would regularly audit state programs to ensure that the federal standards are followed. Only through federal standards would consumers be uniformly protected from SE contamination of eggs and egg products throughout the country. Under such an approach, the federal government would establish minimum standards and states would have the authority to add any additional protections that they deem appropriate.

AARP appreciates this opportunity to reaffirm and more sharply focus its views regarding the Egg Safety Action Plan. We look forward to working with FDA and USDA to develop an effective SE control strategy for eggs and egg products. If you have any questions, please contact Larry White on our Federal Affairs staff at (202) 434-3800.

Sincerely,



Martin A. Corry
Director
Federal Affairs



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