

**FDA Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Briefing for Foods Stakeholders  
March 18, 2020  
3:45 pm ET**

**Transcript**

Coordinator: Thank you for standing by. As a reminder, today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, to please disconnect at this time. Your lines are on a listen-only mode until the question and answer session of today's conference. At that time, you may press star one to ask a question. Please unmute your phones and state your first and last name when prompted. It is now my pleasure to turn the conference over to Kari Barrett, public engagement. Thank you. You may go ahead.

Kari Barrett: Thank you, and thank you all for joining us today. As noted, my name is Kari Barrett and I'll be serving as the call moderator. The purpose of today's FDA call is to discuss food safety and food supply questions related to Covid-19 with our foods program stakeholders.

This is not a media briefing. All media inquiry should continue to be directed to the FDA Office of Media Affairs. On our call today, FDA's foods program leadership and the Office of Regulatory Affairs will provide an overview of current activities, response to stakeholders concerns identified in recent days and highlight important FDA resources in response to Covid-19's pandemic.

I am joined today by Mr. Frank Yiannas, Deputy Commissioner for Food Policy and Response, Mr. Michael Rogers, Assistant Commissioner for Human and Animal Foods Operations, Office of Regulatory Affairs, and Dr. Susan Mayne, Director of Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

Following the formal remarks, we will open the call up and take a few questions during the question and answer session.

At this time, I would like to turn the call over to our first speaker, Mr. Yiannas.

Mr. Yiannas: Well, good afternoon and thank you for joining us today. This is a new frontier for all of us as we deal with the realities of a pandemic, the impact it's having on our lives, on our families, on our communities and on our work.

Let me assure that FDA is committed to protecting the health of the American people and facing any challenges that might arise during this crisis. That has never been more true than it is today. We are committed to ensuring the safety of the food supply and that the food supply chain from farm to table is not disrupted.

Yesterday we took several steps in our ongoing efforts to fulfill this commitment including posting new frequently-asked questions about Covid-19 and food on our Web site and issuing new guidance to help prevent disruption to the supply chain by issuing a temporary change on (Tismo) supplier verification onsite audit requirements.

Today we would like to tell you a little bit more about the actions we've taken and additional steps we plan to take. And let me assure you that the U.S. food supply remains safe. And there are no food shortages.

While we're aware that due to heavy consumer demand over the past week and weekend, certain food skews or food items may have been low in stock in your local grocery store. This is largely a demand issue, not a lack of supply and manufacturers and retailers alike are working around the clock to replenish shelves.

I'd like to begin with our commitment to workers both at FDA and within the food system. We had an unwavering commitment to protect the health of FDA staff on the front line to food safety and equally the health of workers on farms and in food establishments all over this nation.

We've taken certain steps to help reduce the risk of infection for FDA inspectors in a way that we believe won't interrupt the process by which safe foods that you produce reach the market.

Michael Rogers who will follow me will be discussing the changes we're making on an interim basis and how we'll be conducting inspections to be protective of personal health while supporting you and meeting our public health responsibilities.

And equally it's important for us to protect the health and wellbeing of employees in the food industry responsible for bringing food from farm to table.

Everyone - and I mean everyone working in Food, is a critical part of this nation's infrastructure and we are grateful for what they're doing to feed people across the country at this critical time.

Following Michael, you're going to hear from Dr. Susan Mayne who will be discussing safeguards we have in place and others that we recommend to help keep these invaluable workers safe.

And I know you have concerns and we're here to try to address them to the best of our ability.

So, let me start off with an overview of what we're doing to help ensure food safety and access.

First, let me be clear. There is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with transmission of Covid-19. Let me repeat, there is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with the transmission of Covid-19.

This is not a food-borne gastrointestinal virus like Norovirus or Hepatitis A. The virus that causes Covid-19 is one that causes respiratory illness and it is not known to be transmitted by exposure to food.

It's much more likely that an infected person will spread the virus through person-to-person transmission rather than through contaminated food or food packaging.

Of course, it might be possible that a person can get Covid-19 by touching a frequently contacted surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose or eyes.

But this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads. For these reasons, we do not -- and let me emphasize, we do not -- anticipate that food products would need to be recalled or withdrawn from market should a person that works in a food facility be confirmed for Covid-19.

Furthermore, there is no nationwide shortages of food. I suspect I'd have the same experience that you've had visiting your local grocery store and seeing some shelf empty of certain items. But this is temporary until the stores can restock and replenish.

Food production and food manufacturing are widely dispersed through the U.S. and there are currently no widespread disruptions reported in the food supply chain. We, and when I say we, I mean all of us must continue to reassure and remind the American people that there's no need to hoard food, that they should only buy what they need for their family for a week or so. And in fact, National Retail Associations are issuing the same advice, telling us that retail supply chains remain strong.

That said, FDA is working with food manufacturers and grocery stores to closely monitor the food supply chain for any shortages.

Now, let me say something about partnerships. Addressing this crisis is a team effort and it involves an all of government approach as you've heard. It also involves public/private collaboration and that's why we're teaming up with all partners at this critical time.

FDA is working with the White House, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Industry as well as state and international regulatory partners to monitor and mitigate any impact on food safety and food access for the American public.

I personally am also a part of the White House level coordinated committee on supply chains. And I can assure you that this group has broad representation from all components of the federal government that need to be in close contact on supply chain monitoring.

They're also working with partners to address reported challenges associated with quarantines and travel restrictions that might be impeding your ability to continue to work in (unintelligible) product. This includes working with state and federal officials and industry to help ensure that food workers can get to

and from their jobs in communities where curfews and shelter in place directives are being enforced.

In closing, we want consumers to be confident in the safety of their food and we want them to have access to foods they need for themselves and for their families.

While Michael will now talk to you about our enforcement posture, I want to personally emphasize to everyone at all points in the food supply continuum that the FDA will provide maximum flexibility to ensure that they can do their work to safely feed the American public.

In the talks I've given in the 15 months that I've been at FDA, I've often closed my speeches by saying that one of the things I've learned in the years in private sector is that there's a lot the industry can do to provide food and keep it safe.

And I've learned from my time here at FDA now that there's a lot of government can do to keep food safe and available. But what is crystal clear to me now more today than ever before is that there's so much more we can do and will do together. Thank you.

Kari Barrett: Thank you, Mr. Yiannas. Mr. Rogers?

Mr. Michael Rogers: Thank you and good afternoon, everyone. Again, my name is Michael Rogers and I'm the Assistant Commissioner for Human and Animal Food Operations in FDA's Office of Regulatory Affairs and I oversee the portfolio of the agency that carries out inspections, investigations and sample collections at domestic and foreign human and animal Food manufacturers and farms.

And as part of this briefing, we wanted to give you a sense of what the industry should expect to see for the foreseeable future related to our current approach for inspections in the domestic arena that complement the recommendations from the White House, the CDC and the local social distancing measures being adopted by many of the states that seem to change on a daily basis.

We also want to inform this group about a procedural change that we're adopting for the domestic inspections that we plan to conduct going forward and reiterate a message regarding an area where we plan to use regulatory discretion with respect to some of the requirements under the foreign supplier verification program.

So, our approach for domestic inspections during this Covid-19 pandemic will be to focus our inspection resources on those mission critical and for cause inspections in the domestic arena and to postpone for the time being the routine surveillance inspections that we were planning to conduct this fiscal year.

This is an approach that we plan to re-evaluate on a periodic basis. Our approach will always put the public health mission of the agency first and it's focused on ensuring that the food supply is safe. It also takes into account the safety of our workforce, their families and industries workforce. Also, in a way, not to overburden our industry stakeholders.

Many of you are also aware that earlier this month we announced that we were postponing most foreign facility inspections through April and that inspections outside of the U.S. deemed mission critical will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

So, related to domestic inspections, our approach to postpone our domestic routine surveillance inspections will take into account the operational status of the firm and in many cases must reflect any geographic restrictions that the states are adopting - for example, some of the decisions related to shelter in place.

Now, that's not to say that FDA won't be conducting and inspecting at your facility. Rather that our focus during this time will be on mission critical work.

And as part of this approach, you should know that the FDA will be conducting mission critical inspections where and when they are needed if there is any possible way to get there and accomplish them in a way that does not put anyone at risk.

During this time, I'll offer that we're also evaluating ways to accomplish our mission, in some cases, without our traditional level of on-site presence at firms as part of our inspections. And we also plan to engage with industry on the best way to do that.

I'll also add that the safety of the food supply is a shared responsibility between the regulators and the industries. And during this period, quite frankly, I think we'll be leveraging even more the role that industry has to ensure that the food supply is safe for all consumers.

In my opening comments, I also mentioned a process change for our domestic inspections and let me quickly address that. So many of you who have been inspected by the FDA know that the majority of our domestic inspections in the foods program are unannounced and we've decided to modify that



procedure and for the foreseeable future we will be pre-announcing the majority of the inspections that we will be conducting in the domestic arena.

In some rare occasions, we may need to conduct an unannounced inspection but quite frankly right now I can't think of many scenarios that would warrant that approach at this time.

I also want to alert this audience to an area where we're exercising regulatory discretion. Yesterday we issued guidance on FDA's intention to temporarily halt the enforcement of supplier verification onsite auto requirements for receiving facilities and importers under the Food Safety Modernization Act in response to this global pandemic.

And so typically these verification activities include onsite audits and sampling and testing or a review of food safety records. And, so we understand that travel advisories and restrictions may impact the ability of receiving facilities and (FSVP) imported to conduct onsite audits and a supplier. So, we know that's a challenge for the industry.

So, I'll conclude by saying that you should be assured that the FDA is focused on providing the highest possible level of public health protection in support of FDA's mission during these challenging times. And I want to thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions after we hear from Dr. Mayne. Thank you.

Kari Barrett: Thank you, Mr. Rogers. Dr. Mayne?

Dr. Susan Mayne: Hi, this is Susan Mayne. I'm the Director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition at the FDA. And I want to begin by reiterating what Frank acknowledged at the top of the briefing, that we really appreciate your

patience and that we are working diligently on behalf of the American people and the food industry to address food safety and food access issues as they relate to FDA regulated products.

Yesterday the FDA posted a new set of frequently asked questions at [FDA.gov/food](https://www.fda.gov/food). I urge you to check those questions and answers to see if they can answer some of the questions that you all have had and that we have been receiving. And we will be updating them as fast as we can.

We have a strong partnership within the FDA. We work across centers. I know we've had some questions coming in today, for example, about hand sanitizers. We work in very close partnership with CEDR, the Center for Drugs that Regulation hand sanitizers. They're working very hard to expand access where possible for these hand sanitizers and we have made them aware of some of the questions you have (unintelligible) up for us.

We also have a strong partnership across the public and private sectors that are involved in food and agricultural production as well as other sectors that intersect with food production like transportation and energy to respond to emergency situations.

This is coordinated through the Department of Homeland Security. We especially care about what's happening for the workers in food facilities. Facility food safety plans are required to include plans for controlling any risks that might be associated with workers who are ill regardless of the type of virus or bacteria.

These food safety plans have requirements for maintaining clean and sanitized facilities and food contact surfaces.

Restaurants and retail food establishments are regulated at the state and local level. States, local and tribal regulators use the FDA's food code to develop or update their own food safety rules.

Again, there is no current evidence to support the transmission of the novel coronavirus that causes Covid-19 associated with food or food packaging.

As a next precaution, to help avoid the transmission of this virus through surface contact, we recommend frequent washing and sanitizing of all food contact surfaces and utensils. Food service workers also must practice frequent handwashing and glove changes before and after preparing food. Include frequent cleaning, sanitizing of counters and condiment containers. Consumers should wash their hands after using serving utensils.

In communities with sustained transmission of Covid-19, state and local health authorities have implemented social distancing measures which discourage or prohibit dining in congregate settings.

We also recommend discontinuing self-service buffets and salad bars until these measures are lifted.

Unlike food-borne gastrointestinal viruses like Norovirus and Hepatitis A that often make people ill through contaminated food, the Novel Coronavirus which causes Covid-19 is a respiratory virus that causes respiratory illness.

Food borne exposure to this virus is not known to be a route of transmission. If an employee is confirmed to have Covid-19, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to this virus in the workplace but maintain confidentiality. Employees exposed to a coworker with confirmed

Covid-19 should follow CDC's guidance, what to do if you are sick with Coronavirus disease 2019, Covid-19.

Employers should consult with the local health department for additional guidance.

While the primary responsibility in this instance is to take appropriate actions to protect other workers and people who might have come in contact with the ill employee, facilities should redouble their cleaning and sanitation effort to control any risks that might be associated with workers who are ill regardless of the type of virus or bacteria.

For example, facilities are required to maintain, clean and sanitize facilities and food contact surfaces.

I want to take a few minutes to direct you to some additional resources - just about every government agency, health and emergency operation center working on this issue. FDA's Web site points you to where information for Covid-19 is posted and how to direct questions as to Web sites for our partners from USDA, CDC and EPA.

If you are experiencing issues regarding your supply chain, delivery of goods or business continuity, please contact the FEMA National Business Emergency Operation Center and it's an acronym, N-B-E-O-C@FEMA.DHS.gov. Again, that's N-B-E-O-C@FEMA.DHS.gov - FEMA's National Business Emergency Operation Center.

This is a 24/7 operation and they can assist in directing your inquiry to the property contact. Get in touch with them if you are having problems with

transportation or moving food or getting food through areas that have been post-quarantined.

In terms of the FDA, the main coronavirus food page is at [www.fda.gov/food](http://www.fda.gov/food).

In addition, the best way to ensure that your food safety questions are getting through to the FDA, are to submit them to us through a mechanism we have stood up to use for this specific coronavirus. We've used it with the (unintelligible) technical assistance network before and it's our food and cosmetic information center.

The site for that is [www.FDA.gov/F-C-I-C](http://www.FDA.gov/F-C-I-C) which stands for Food and Cosmetic Information Center. So, if you have food safety technical questions, please submit them to our food cosmetic information center. Those questions will be logged in and they will be answered. Again, if you have supply chain issues, those should go in through the mechanism with FEMA that I described previously.

Thank you. I'm going to turn it back over to the moderator.

Kari Barrett: Thank you very much, Dr. Mayne. At this time, again I want to thank everyone for joining us. I do think we have a few minutes to take some questions, so if the operator would like to help us with that process now.

Coordinator: Thank you. At this time, if you would like to ask a question, you may press star one. Please unmute your phones and state your first and last name when prompted.

Our first question comes from (Chris Newton) and please state your organization. (Chris Newton), your line is open and please state your organization.

(Chris Newton): Yes. Hi, I am with (Saber) Food Safety International. Can you hear me?

Coordinator: Yes.

Kari Barrett: Yes. You can ask your question.

(Chris Newton): As you were talking on mission critical domestic inspections, can you explain a little further what would be a mission critical - cause for a mission critical inspection, please. Thank you.

Michael Rogers: Thank you for that question. This is Michael, so I'll address that. We put our (unintelligible) inspections into two categories - routine surveillance that I referenced, and those are the inspections that we accomplish throughout the fiscal year as part of our routine inspectional coverage. In some cases, inspection frequency mandates related to FSMA require that we inspect some firms once every three years with the high-risk facilities and the non-high-risk facilities once every five years.

That's the surveillance category. Those are the types of inspections that we would consider to be routine surveillance.

The for cause and mission critical inspections - I can give you some examples in the food phase. So, inspections that might be in support of a food-borne outbreak or in support of a Class One recall or in support of a product that is related to the Covid-19 pandemic would be a category of the type of

inspections that the agency would do its best to accomplish provided that it doesn't put anyone at risk.

Kari Barrett: Thank you. Operator, we can take another question.

Coordinator: Thank you. (Alva Velasco), you may go ahead.

(Alva Velasco): Hi. I'm calling from U.S. (unintelligible) Company. Can you hear me?

Kari Barrett: Yes.

Michael Rogers: We can.

(Alva Velasco): My question is I just wanted to make sure - we are a food manufacturer and we want to make sure that our product is safe and is high-quality, of course. So, would we have to follow any procedures and if, let's say, one of our employees is sick with Covid-19, would we have to place that product on hold until we make sure it's safe? Or do we just follow our own internal procedures? Thank you so much.

Dr. Susan Mayne: So, this is Susan. I can take that question. We have several questions that we put on our Web site that directly address that question. And the answer is no, we're not requesting that you put product on hold. There's a whole bunch of theories of questions and answers that we've addressed. You want to prevent spreading within the plant obviously, so the primary goal is to prevent the spread person to person, but we are not asking that food be placed on hold or that food be recalled or anything like that. And I would direct you to our Web site with the question and answers we just posted yesterday that really get into that.

Kari Barrett: Great, thank you. Operator, I think we could take another question.

Coordinator: Thank you. (Kerry Leary), you may go ahead and please state your organization. (Kerry Leary), your line is open. Please state your organization. We can go to the next question. (Jody Blanch-Gordan), you may go ahead and please state your organization.

(Jody Blanch-Gordan): Hi, this is (Jody) from (Gorchans). Can you hear me?

Kari Barrett: Yes.

Coordinator: Yes, thanks.

(Jody Blanch-Gordan): Yes. We're a national food manufacturer. Will we be considered essential or critical to infrastructure for supplying the food? In other words, could the state of Massachusetts shut us down or is there any other guidance there?

Dr. Susan Mayne: I can address that. Food and agriculture is a critical sector in the infrastructure under the Department of Homeland Security. So, we want to do everything possible to make sure that food and egg continues production manufacturing without hinderance because it is a critical sector. So, if you have any challenges in that regard, those should be directed to the FEMA information that I provided earlier.

Again, under Department of Homeland Security, we coordinate across different sectors. That includes transportation. That includes energy. If you're having any logistical challenges in maintaining your supply chain, please reach out to FEMA and we will work with the FEMA process to make sure that you can continue to produce food.



(Jody Blanch-Gordan): Thank you.

Kari Barrett: Thank you. Operator, I think we can take another question.

Coordinator: Thank you...

Kari Barrett: One more.

Coordinator: ...(Penny Greenwood), you may go ahead and please state your organization. (Penny Greenwood), your line is open. We'll go to the next question. (Matt Coffin), you may go ahead and please state your organization.

(Matt Coffin): Hi, this is (Matt Coffin) with (unintelligible), Inc. A question regarding local health officials that are asking us to - from a restaurant standpoint to take temperatures of employees. Do you have any guidance on how this should be done when mothers aren't accessible? And we don't want to have touch-to-touch thermometers involving employees.

Dr. Susan Mayne: This is Susan. I'll try to take that. What I would say is work with your local health department. What I will tell you again is there is coordination across the FDA. We are aware that there are shortages of some of these touchless thermometers. That is the part that's regulated by different piece of the FDA. We are on daily communication calls. We're aware that there are some shortages on those issues and working hard at FDA to increase production and make those available. But in the meantime, I would suggest working with your local health department.

Kari Barrett: Thank you. And thank you to all of our speakers and to everyone who has joined us today. Again, this is Kari Barrett. I want to remind you that we

have recorded today's call. It will be available in replay through our FDA.gov Web site - if you look at workshops, meetings and webinars on the food and dietary supply supplement webpage.

We hope to have this recording up later today but please do give us 24 hours to get it up, although our intention is to get it up as soon as we can.

So, again, this will conclude today's call, and thank you very much for your time and your participation. Thank you.

Coordinator: And thank you. This concludes today's conference call. You may go ahead and disconnect at this time.

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