

TALKING POINTS ON USDA AND SCHOOL MEAL SAFETY

USDA is committed to ensuring that school children receive safe and healthy food

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) ensures that the nation's nutrition assistance programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), meet individuals' food and nutrition needs.
- The health and safety of the 31 million children we serve each day in our school nutrition programs is of the utmost importance to us.
- USDA is committed to a comprehensive, coordinated approach to food safety for the NSLP. USDA Foods represent 15-20% of all food served in school meals and our specifications for these foods meet or exceed standards set for commercial products.

USDA's various agencies work together to provide interlocking rings of protection against foodborne illness

- Various USDA agencies responsible for ensuring the safety of these products have implemented policies and practices designed to prevent foodborne illness in the school environment.
- These practices include inspection and safety plan requirements for each school cafeteria administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), rigorous purchasing protocols and testing requirements administered by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA), and mandatory food safety controls implemented by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS).
- Because of this system, USDA foods are equal to, and often exceed, the quality of their commercial counterparts.
- Among the key elements of the system to protect schools are:
 - All products purchased by AMS that pose microbial concern must undergo testing - beyond any testing that FSIS or FDA might require - to ensure processing sanitation and product safety.
 - Products produced for NSLP are held by the producer until the test results confirm that the product is free from pathogens.
 - Highly trained AMS graders are stationed in processing plants across the nation (at all hours of production) to make sure that the products meet our high standards.
 - All fruit and vegetable suppliers must pass a yearly plant or packing facility audit that ensures the vendor produces products in a clean, sanitary environment in accordance with the Food and Drug Administration's Good Manufacturing Practices.
 - Offers to sell products to the school lunch program are not accepted from vendors that do not meet requirements. Contractors can be prohibited from bidding on further contracts until the requirement(s) have been met or problems rectified.
 - Schools are the only retail outlets required to have a HACCP plan that addresses food safety concerns, and under the 2004 Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization all schools in the School Meal Programs receive two food safety inspections each school year.

- The system builds upon the existing protections of FSIS, which works with other federal partners to regulate food products in commerce, including those products purchased by schools on the commercial market and for schools through the USDA commodity program. FSIS works closely with AMS, FSA, and FNS in the event of a recall to notify schools that may have received recalled products.

The system has been successful, and USDA is committed to making sure it remains as effective as possible

- The GAO has concluded that due to USDA's system, schools are some of the safest environments for food safety.
- In order to ensure that this successful record continues, Secretary Vilsack has ordered an independent review of the testing procedures and requirements of the National School Lunch Program and charged the Department with ensuring that all products supplied to America's school children are safe and healthy and that our purchasing processes remain equivalent with best industry practices.
- This review is part of the Obama Administration's commitment to food safety, which started with the launch of the President's Food Safety Working Group within a few months of taking office. The Working Group is charged with strengthening our food safety system, improving collaboration among federal agencies, and focusing efforts on preventing food borne illness.