



January 2, 2013

Secretary Tom Vilsack
United States Department of Agriculture
Room 200, Jamie L. Whitten Building
12th Street and Jefferson Drive SW
Washington, DC 20250

Transmitted via facsimile: (202) 720-2166

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I am writing to follow up on my letter of September 5, 2012 and your October 1, 2012 response regarding recent imported meat refusals from Australia. Food & Water Watch has come into possession of several documents that indicate that the rate of import refusals for meat products from Australia has actually increased since our last communication, raising concerns that the new privatized meat inspection system in Australia – the Australian Export Meat Inspection System (AEMIS) – is not working. Once again, we urge USDA to reassess its equivalency determination of that inspection system.

You will find attached a December 12, 2012 letter from Dr. Ronald K. Jones, Assistant Administrator for the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), to Mr. Greg Read, Executive Manager of the Food Division of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS), Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF). In that letter, Dr. Jones describes the on-going communications between FSIS and AQIS to address the presence of fecal and ingesta contamination in imported meat shipments from Australia that was discovered by FSIS import inspection personnel in early 2012. Dr. Jones went on to state:

“Within the last month, there have been five additional zero tolerance (fecal material/ingesta) POE (point-of-entry) violations in four separate establishments, including one establishment that had repetitive violations during this month, as well as earlier this calendar year...FSIS is...interested in the activities AQIS has planned or is undertaking from a system-wide perspective that will prevent fecal material and ingesta contamination of the carcass during the slaughter process. FSIS requests a response with 20 days of the date of this letter.”¹

It is significant that Dr. Jones has concluded that this is a systemic and not an isolated

¹ Letter from Dr. Ronald K. Jones to Greg Read, December 12, 2012.

problem within the Australian meat inspection regulatory regime due to the multiplicity of violations that were found in 2012.

You will also find attached two e-mail communications authored by Dr. John Langbridge, Veterinary Counsel for the Australian Meat Industry Council (AMIC), to Australian meat industry officials in which he recounts conversations he has had with Greg Read regarding the imported meat rejections cited by USDA. In his December 19, 2012 e-mail, Dr. Langbridge made the following observations:

“Plants supplying meat to the US will need to review their dressing procedures, their carcass and meat hygiene monitoring procedures and their interpretation of ‘zero tolerance’ defects given these rejections...DAFF are also expecting a US audit of Australia’s meat production and certification systems early next year as a result of these recent rejections and rejections for 0157 rejections earlier this year. DAFF are also concerned that FSIS may review their recognition of Australia’s meat production systems as low risk, which may increase the rate of port of entry sampling

This situation has the potential to slow down the rate of reform.”²

We assume that what Dr. Langbridge refers to as “reform” is the further privatization of meat inspection in Australia. Dr. Langbridge also revealed in his e-mail that the number of imported meat rejections of New Zealand products has also increased in recent months.³ As you know, USDA also granted equivalency status in 2011 to a privatized meat inspection system for certain red meat products imported from New Zealand.⁴

In his December 24, 2012 e-mail, Dr. Langbridge revealed the following:

“Greg Read spoke to the US on Friday.

I am informed that the US made it clear that Australia is now the worst performer of all their exporting countries.”⁵

Dr. Langbridge went on to say that DAFF was considering taking retaliatory measures against U.S. meat products exported to Australia by tightening up on inspection procedures at the Australian ports of entry.⁶

On October 1, 2012, Food & Water Watch hosted a meeting of several Australian meat industry officials in our Washington, DC office. Dr. Langbridge was one of the participants in the meeting at which he made a fairly lengthy presentation on the measures the

² E-mail from Dr. John Langbridge, Australian Meat Industry Council, December 19, 2012.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See http://www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/New_Zealand_Equivalence_Determination_10172011.pdf

⁵ E-mail from Dr. Langbridge, Australian Meat Industry Council, December 24, 2012.

⁶ Ibid.

Australian meat industry was taking to ensure the safety of meat exports to the United States. We made it clear to him that we knew of the import rejections that had taken place earlier in 2012 and that we were following all developments regarding the implementation of AEMIS as the overwhelming majority of Australian meat plants had moved to that inspection model. We informed Dr. Langbridge that we remained very skeptical of AEMIS. It appears from recent events that our skepticism was warranted.

We consider the rash of recent import rejections from Australia to be disturbing. In 2011, we imported 476,073,302 pounds of red meat products from Australia.⁷ Australia is our second largest meat trading partner. If one is to believe the projections of the Australian meat industry, the level of imports is due to rise due to the liquidation of U.S. livestock herds caused by the severe drought experienced in certain parts of the country in 2011 and 2012.⁸

U.S. consumers should not be endangered by unsafe imports from Australia or from any other country exporting to the United States. The United States continues to recognize privatized inspection systems of exporting countries that do not seem to be working and are putting consumers at risk. In 2012, we experienced a 2.5 million pound recall of Canadian beef products that were potentially contaminated with *E. coli* 0157:H7 produced using a privatized inspection system that the USDA had secretly recognized in 2006.⁹ It seems that the collaboration among the so-called Quad Countries (i.e., the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) has led to a series of meat inspection deregulation schemes that are putting consumers at risk not only here in the United States but around the world.

In light of the concerns outlined above, we have the following questions:

- 1) What is the status of the discussions between the United States and Australia regarding the point of entry rejections involving fecal and ingesta contamination? What measures has Australia taken to resolve these issues?
- 2) What measures has New Zealand taken to resolve the point of entry rejections involving its meat exports to the United States?
- 3) Is USDA planning to review the equivalency determinations of AEMIS, the High Linespeed Inspection System (HLIS) in Canada, and the alternate post-mortem inspection system approved for New Zealand in light of recent developments involving the safety of the meat products imported from those countries?

⁷ United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Calculation using the Foreign Agricultural Trade of the United States (FATUS) database.

⁸ See <http://www.efarming.com.au/News/efarmingnews/5282/us-drought-to-boost-aussie-beef.html>

⁹ See <http://foodpoisoningbulletin.com/2012/food-water-watch-asks-ag-secretary-to-examine-canadian-import-equivalency/>

4) Will USDA halt the HACCP-based Inspection Models Project in swine slaughter? Will USDA withdraw its January 27, 2012 proposed rule to privatize inspection in poultry slaughter?

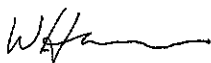
5) Will USDA make public all agendas and minutes of the meetings and teleconferences involving the Quad Countries dating back to 2000?

6) Will USDA agree to make all future meetings involving the Quad Countries open to the public?

Should you have any questions regarding this matter, please feel free to contact me.

Happy New Year.

Sincerely,



Wenonah Hauter
Executive Director

Attachments

Cc: Senator Debbie Stabenow
Senator Pat Roberts
Senator Barbara Mikulski
Senator Thad Cochran
Senator Kirsten Gillibrand
Representative Frank Lucas
Representative Collin Peterson
Representative Hal Rogers
Representative Nita Lowey
Representative Robert Aderholt
Representative Sam Farr
Representative Rosa DeLauro
Under Secretary Elisabeth Hagen
FSIS Administrator Alfred Almanza
FSIS Assistant Administrator Daniel Englejohn
FSIS Assistant Administrator Rachel Edelstein
FSIS Assistant Administrator Ronald Jones



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

Washington, DC
20250

Mr. Greg Read
Executive Manager, Food Division
Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS)
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Edmund Barton Building
GPO Box 858
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

DEC 12 2012

Dear Mr. Read:

Thank you for your June 29, 2012, letter, detailing the actions implemented by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) in response to multiple FSIS point-of-entry (POE) fecal material and ingesta violations. We appreciate your commitment to address these issues. However, FSIS has a concern that the measures currently implemented have a limited focus on repetitive violations within an establishment and do not appear to be effective across the system. Within the last month, there have been five additional zero tolerance (fecal material/ingesta) POE violations in four separate establishments, including one establishment that had repetitive violations during this month, as well as earlier this calendar year.

FSIS has provided AQIS with individual notifications of the zero tolerance POE violations, requesting a response to each violation. FSIS is also interested in the activities AQIS has planned or is undertaking from a system-wide perspective that will prevent fecal material and ingesta contamination of the carcass during the slaughter process. FSIS requests a response within 20 days of the date of this letter.

FSIS would like to discuss these concerns as AQIS considers its response to resolving the issue beyond corrective actions taken in individual establishments for zero tolerance (fecal material/ingesta) POE violations. Please contact me directly via phone at (202) 720-2442 or by electronic mail at ronald.jones@fsis.usda.gov to schedule a date and time for a teleconference.

Respectfully,

Dr. Ronald K. Jones
Assistant Administrator
Office of International Affairs

From: John Langbridge

Sent: Wednesday, 19 December 2012 7:09 AM

Councillors

Yesterday I met with Greg Read to primarily go through AMICs Animal Welfare strategy as agreed by Council. He took the opportunity to share the attached letter from FSIS with me. That letter refers to 5 detections of faeces or ingesta in Australian meat over the last month at the port of entry into the US leading to rejections. New Zealand received a similar letter last month. 4 of these rejections have been in small stock and one in beef. There have been no STEC detections in beef.

DAFF have received one photo of a cause of rejection and it shows that the contaminant is very small and maybe questionable as faeces or ingesta. DAFF also acknowledge that the US import inspector may be on a heightened state of vigilance due to the introduction of alternate inspection systems in both Australia and New Zealand. DAFF will be raising these two issues in discussion with FSIS.

Regardless of this DAFF have to respond proactively as do industry. DAFF have already cross reviewed the individual plants and have found inconsistencies in dressing practices that could have led to this contamination.

Plants supplying meat to the US will need to review their dressing procedures, their carcass and meat hygiene monitoring procedures and their interpretation of "zero tolerance" defects given these rejections.

DAFF are reviewing MHA particularly around small stock and will have a draft of a revised MHA for industry consideration shortly. DAFF are also expecting a US audit of Australia's meat production and certification systems early next year as a result of these recent rejections and rejections for O157 rejections earlier this year. DAFF are also concerned that FSIS may review their recognition of Australia's meat production systems as low risk, which may increase the rate of port of entry sampling.

This situation has the potential to slow down the rate of reform.

Greg Read wants to discuss these recent rejections with the AMIC representatives of the small stock sector immediately after the Inter-Departmental Committee meeting on Thursday. Other AMIC representatives are welcome. I have spoken to David and will speak to Roger separately on this.

I will keep you up to date on developments.

Regards

John Langbridge
Veterinary Counsel
Australian Meat Industry Council
Phone: 02 9086 2245

Begin forwarded message:

From: John Langbridge <jlangebridge@amic.org.au>

Date: 24 December 2012 9:54:31 AM AEDT

Subject: RE: FSIS letter re POE ZTs [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]

All

Greg Read spoke to the US on Friday.

I am informed that the US made it clear that Australia is now the worst performer of all their exporting countries. This comment was primarily focused on small stock. The US are expecting a rapid improvement.

As mentioned the other day plants supplying meat to the US will need to review their dressing procedures, their carcass and meat hygiene monitoring procedures and their interpretation of "zero tolerance" defects given these rejections.

I am also sure that DAFF will significantly increase their verification of MHA on US listed plants and will take a more conservative line with defects opting to call them "zero tolerance" rather than hide dirt or fall out if in any doubt. This is obviously what FSIS import inspectors are doing.

All

David Larkin, Roger Fletcher, John Berry, Steve Martyn and myself met with Greg Read over this issue.

Greg Read outlined his concerns as per my email of Tuesday (below).

DAFF have reviewed data from the PHI and will provide AMIC with a copy of that work shortly.

In summary there are aspects of the current PHI that add no value but there are others aspects seem to be more correlated with finished product hygiene. They are still finding that quite a number of plants can't show a correlation between carcass micro results and boning room carton testing. They also have found no value in Carton Meat Assessment. They also think that ESAM is not very useful. They would also prefer to do MHA prior to trimming to enable a better trace back to the process control problems that trimming may hide. Obviously the triggers for corrective action would need to be reviewed. Doing the assessment in that position may not be that easy given some of the physical layouts of plants which is why MHA up this point only included this as an option.

They have also noted that some of the required corrective action is actually a disincentive to finding problems as the QA finds the problem and then has to monitor a larger sample as a penalty. They have reviewed this approach to remove disincentives wherever possible.

As a result of this analysis they have developed a draft revision to MHA. We have agreed to trial that revision on a couple of small stock plants. We will also be asking QA Managers on plant for any issues that they may consider worth reviewing for inclusion in this process.

We have also raised with DAFF that this needs to apply to US listed plants only.

Greg Read will be talking to FSIS tomorrow morning about the Australian response to that letter. He will mention a review of MHA to tighten the situation up but will stay away from the detail as noted above.

I will keep you informed of further progress.

Regards

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