

## USDA Records Reveal Impact of Inspector Shortages On Meat and Poultry Inspection

### Background

In April 2011, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) began to phase in the use of a new information technology system, the Public Health Information System (PHIS). This web-based tool is designed to capture more data in each inspected meat and poultry plant so food safety problems could be detected more quickly and FSIS inspectors could take corrective actions more expeditiously than the old information technology system allowed. PHIS was supposed to foster an era of "data-driven inspection." The new IT system became fully operational nationally in the spring of 2012.

Unfortunately, there have been glitches in the new system, which have prevented it from achieving the high expectations the agency had set for it. The system is cumbersome to use; plants in some areas of the country still have connectivity issues, making it hard to reliably access the internet; some of the initial information loaded into the system was incorrect; and software issues impeded FSIS inspectors from doing their jobs.

One of the selling points of PHIS was that inspectors would be able to schedule their own work. Each month, inspectors who were trained to use the new system would receive a list of inspection tasks to perform in the plants to which they were assigned. They would have the latitude to schedule those tasks as they saw fit during that month. The agency management maintained that the tasks assigned to each inspector could be easily performed within the month.

The union representing the inspectors, the National Joint Council of Food Inspection Local Unions, was not convinced, so it insisted that codes be created for when inspectors could not complete an inspection task. That way, 24 different reasons for not being able to complete a task would also be recorded in PHIS, using a list of codes released in 2012.

While PHIS was being implemented, the agency proposed a rule on January 27, 2012 that would change the way poultry was inspected in slaughterhouses by reducing the number of FSIS inspectors, turning their responsibilities over to company employees. In anticipation of implementing the new system, FSIS imposed a freeze on hiring inspectors and began to hire temporary inspectors in place of permanent ones who had either left the agency or had taken other jobs within FSIS. Severe inspector shortages began to develop around many parts of the country. In fact, in a FY2015 budget document, the agency made the following statement:

*"FSIS took steps to permanently reduce personnel through actions such as the modernization of poultry slaughter methods, consolidating 15 District Offices into 10, imposing hiring restrictions, improving efficiency through systems like PHIS, using shared services, reorganizing some staff functions and disbanding the Office of International Affairs to increase effectiveness for both the staff and field. FSIS also permitted its hire lag to increase in FY 2013 to reduce salary costs. If the agency continued current operations, some of the staff reductions that the Agency has absorbed would not be sustainable, and it would be vital to the successful accomplishment of the Food Safety mission to back-fill these positions. However, due to anticipation of Poultry Slaughter Modernization rule publication in FY 2014, the Agency has determined that it is not prudent to rehire the formerly filled positions at this time because the new methods for poultry slaughter requires fewer Federal in plant personnel. While this will continue short term staffing and scheduling issues, FSIS thinks that it can continue to operate effectively until it begins to implement modernization of poultry slaughter methods. In this manner FSIS will avoid hiring*

*and then firing inspectors as Poultry Slaughter Modernization further decreases the available inspector positions and the overall Agency costs.”*

On August 3, 2015, Food & Water Watch filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with FSIS asking for the entries in PHIS where the “not performed” codes were used by FSIS inspectors for the period between August 1, 2014 and July 31, 2015.

On October 29, 2015, Food & Water Watch received a spreadsheet from FSIS of all instances, broken down by establishment, where FSIS inspectors used the “not performed codes.” The spreadsheet reveals that FSIS is under severe strain to meet its statutory obligations for continuous inspection, thus placing consumers and public health at risk.

### **Chart 1**

Frequency of “not performed” task codes listed in PHIS by establishment number, August 2014 through July 2015.

Several of the most frequently used codes are those that relate to staff shortages or insufficient time for inspectors to complete tasks or reach plants. This chart includes establishments that had 300 or more tasks not performed during the covered time period. The full list of not performed tasks is available on request.

### **Chart 2**

The top thirty plants listed for select categories of “not performed” codes, August 2014 through July 2015.