

Statement of Senator Saxby Chambliss

before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Full Committee Hearing on S. 3128, The National Uniformity for Food Act
Thursday, July 27, 2006, 10:00 AM, Dirksen 430

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to share my views on S. 3128, the National Uniformity for Food Act. As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, I engage in this debate from a unique perspective. The Senate Agriculture Committee oversees a significant portion of America's food safety system, and the federal food safety functions over which the committee has jurisdiction have long employed uniform standards to protect public health.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service is responsible for the safety of meat, poultry, and egg products, both domestic and imported. It enforces uniform standards through the authority granted to the USDA by the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act and the Egg Products Inspection Act.

USDA isn't the only agency charged with enforcing national uniformity; there are many other areas where Congress has decided that nationally uniform standards are warranted. These areas include nutrition labeling, allergens, pharmaceuticals, and medical devices to name a few. For example, under the Food Quality Protection Act, a state may not set

tolerance levels for pesticide residues that differ from national levels unless the state petitions the Environmental Protection Agency for an exception.

I support the National Uniformity for Food Act because it will not only remove unnecessary and costly impediments to interstate commerce but even more importantly it will provide consumers with clear and useful information.

The bill will ensure that consumers have access to the same accurate, science-based information regardless of where they live. It will eliminate consumer confusion and bolster confidence in the safety of our food supply by placing our nation's food safety in the hands of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the world's leading food safety agency. In addition, this bill will streamline the regulatory process by creating a single process for establishing food safety standards and warning labels for packaged foods under the authority of the FDA.

States traditionally have played a strong role in the formulation of our nation's food safety policy, and that will not change under this bill. Under the legislation, states will continue to have authority for enforcement, sanitation inspections at local restaurants, licensing, and the protection of public health in the event of a food emergency or a terrorist incident.

States will also be able to continue their constant communication and information-sharing with the FDA when it comes to food safety. A unique provision in the bill allows any state to petition the FDA to keep its existing state law or elevate that standard to the national level following a thorough review of the entire body of scientific evidence. In fact, no state law would disappear upon the enactment of this bill. States would have 180 days to petition the FDA under the provision I just outlined. If the FDA fails to act on a state petition, then that state law would remain in effect.

With the world's safest food supply, every American benefits from uniform food safety standards. The National Uniformity for Food Act builds on that record of success by extending the same approach used by the USDA and other regulatory agencies to the FDA. This is not only a common sense approach, but assures every American that the food they enjoy is regulated by strict, national standards meant to ensure their health and well-being.

I would like to commend Chairman Enzi and the members of this committee for holding this hearing today. It is important to debate this issue in a public forum so that American consumers understand our goal is to strengthen and harmonize food safety efforts in this country. It is rather ironic that at the international level we actively pursue the goal of harmonizing food safety standards, yet we still debate this issue at home.

The National Uniformity for Food Act provides us with an opportunity to bring a long-needed, common sense approach to the regulation of packaged foods.

I urge the members of the committee, as well as the rest of my Senate colleagues to support this bill. Thank you very much.