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U.S. Senator

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STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TOM HARKIN (D-IA)

AT HELP COMMITTEE HEARING ON “KEEPING AMERICA’S FAMILIES SAFE: REFORMING THE FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM”

****AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY****

“Good morning everyone. We meet today to discuss an issue of basic importance to all Americans: the safety of our nation’s food supply.

“There is perhaps no issue that affects Americans as universally as food safety. Safe food is an essential part of our daily lives. And, for many in Iowa and elsewhere, the production, preparation, or sale of food is a source of livelihood.

“On the whole, Americans enjoy safe and wholesome food. But, let’s be honest, our food can be safer and it must be safer. Recent food outbreaks linked to spinach, peppers, peanut products, and cookie dough dramatize two important truths: First, our current regulatory system does not adequately protect Americans from serious, widespread food-borne illnesses. Second, the dangers associated with food-borne outbreaks are profound. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that food-borne diseases cause approximately 76 million illnesses each year, including approximately 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths in the United States. These numbers are staggering and totally intolerable.

“That’s why, as we focus on national health care reform, we can’t afford to ignore food safety. Unsafe food is yet another strain on our health care system. And it is a problem that we can and must address now.

“As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, I was deeply concerned about the issue of food safety. Back in February, after an illness outbreak linked to peanut products, I chaired a hearing that highlighted major problems in our food safety system, including failures to adequately inspect food processing facilities and difficulties associated with product recalls.

“Now, as Chairman of the Senate HELP Committee, I intend to continue my efforts to make our food safer. For over a decade now, I have urged FDA and USDA to strengthen federal food safety, and I have introduced several reform bills. In addition, I have been working closely with FDA to explore more effective ways of safeguarding America’s food supply.

“I am heartened by the fact that the Obama administration has made food safety reform a major domestic policy initiative. In March, the President created the Food Safety Working Group to develop recommendations for bringing our food safety system into the 21st Century.

“Several areas of agreement have emerged from these deliberations.

“We agree that all food needs to be safe, and that an essential means to this end is to emphasize preventive control measures.

“We agree that regulations should be effective, but not excessively burdensome.

“And we agree that we need to respond faster to outbreaks when they do occur. To do this, we need effective surveillance and enforcement measures, so that contaminated foods do not make it to the tables of consumers.

“To accomplish all of these things, we need to modernize food safety programs at FDA. We must reform the system comprehensively.

“Over the last 100 years, our meals have gotten more complex: They include more varied ingredients that are the subject of more diverse methods of processing and preparation. Today, raw agricultural products often travel thousands of miles from farms to factories to fork, and they are routinely processed and mixed along the way. In addition, we rely more and more on foods imported from abroad, often from countries with less rigorous regulation and different production standards than our own.

“Yet, despite dramatic changes in our tastes -- as well as in methods of production and distribution -- our food safety laws have not been adequately modernized. The U.S. regulatory system has failed to keep pace with the proliferation of food sources and processing methods.

“So what do we need to do?

“Most of all, we need improved processes to prevent the contamination of foods. By better testing and tracking food, we can ensure that we provide safe food to all Americans. Today, even though our nation has 150,000 food processors, the FDA visits just 7000 plants each year. And it visits even fewer of the foreign facilities that process food for shipment into the United States. That’s why we need to allocate sufficient resources to cope with the growing food industry, and the growing risks that threaten the safety of our food.

“As I have observed many times, to say that food safety in this country is a patchwork system is giving it too much credit

“It is time – it is past time – to modernize U.S. food safety laws and regulations. We need to act – and we need to act now.

“I am pleased that the President’s Food Safety Working Group has begun a national dialogue on this issue. I am grateful to our two panels of expert witnesses, who will help continue that dialogue today. And I am convinced that, working together, we can and will pass comprehensive food safety reform in this Congress.”