

SAFE FOOD COALITION

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For Immediate Release

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SAFE FOOD COALITION PETITION URGES USDA TO UPDATE SAFE HANDLING INSTRUCTIONS

*Groups Argue that Meat, Poultry and Catfish Labels Should Draw on
Decades of Research to Better Inform Consumers and Prevent Foodborne Illness*

Washington, D.C. – The Safe Food Coalition today submitted a [citizen’s petition](#) asking the U.S. Department of Agriculture to revise the mandatory safe handling instructions (SHI) label for raw and partially cooked meat and poultry products. The Department has not updated the SHI label rules since 1994. The petition asks for revisions that would require labels to include recommended internal end-point temperatures and “rest time” requirements, and instructions to use a thermometer to verify internal temperatures, among other information. The petition also requests that USDA require SHI labels for all raw or partially cooked siluriformes fish, including catfish products, which now fall under USDA’s oversight.

These and other revisions, according to the Coalition, are supported by over two decades of research on consumer behavior in the grocery store and in the kitchen, as well as by research on the survival rates of pathogens at specific end-point temperatures. “Many consumers read the current labels and think they know what ‘cook thoroughly’ means, but the research shows there is a lot of confusion out there,” said Patricia Buck, Executive Director for the Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention. “Using a thermometer to verify the internal temperature of meat, poultry, and catfish products is one of the most important ways to avoid a foodborne illness, and the labels should reflect that fact.”

Under the Federal Meat Inspection Act and Poultry Products Inspection Act, USDA has the authority to require handling instructions to maintain the wholesomeness of the products that it inspects. The Coalition petition argues that the current SHI label fails to meet this objective. “USDA provides this information on its website, but not all consumers have the resources or inclination to find it,” said Thomas Gremillion, Director of Food Policy at Consumer Federation of America. “We think these changes will lead to more informed consumers, which will ultimately benefit public health and the food system as a whole.”

The Coalition maintains that revising the current SHI label, and adding a new one for catfish, is a cost-effective investment in public health. “Improved risk and risk-reduction communication is an integral part of America’s food safety system, but to date, this area has not received the attention that it deserves,” said Tony Corbo, Senior Lobbyist for Food & Water Watch.

The Safe Food Coalition is working to change that through its advocacy for improved labeling. Last year, the Coalition secured the finalization of two new USDA labeling rules—one that identifies meat and poultry products “injected with solutions” and another that informs consumers when they are buying “mechanically tenderized beef” products. The Coalition is confident that these changes to USDA’s food product labels will help the foodservice industry and consumers to follow important safe food handling and preparation steps, which in turn will prevent deadly or disabling foodborne illnesses.

The Safe Food Coalition is made up of consumer groups, public health groups, groups representing victims of foodborne illness, and labor organizations dedicated to reducing the burden of foodborne illness in the United States by improving government food inspection programs.

Safe Food Coalition members include:

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- Center for Science in the Public Interest, David Plunkett, 202-332-9110
- Consumer Federation of America, Thomas Gremillion, 202-939-1010
- Consumers Union, William Wallace, 202-462-6262
- Food & Water Watch, Tony Corbo, 202-683-2449
- National Consumers League, Sally Greenberg, 202-835-3323
- STOP Foodborne Illness, Dierdre Schlunegger, 773-269-6555
- Government Accountability Project, Amanda Hitt, 202-457-0034