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DECLINES IN FOODBORNE INFECTIONS AFFIRM SUCCESS OF INDUSTRY FOOD SAFETY STRATEGIES

Thirty-Six Percent Drop in E. coli O157:H7 Is Largest Ever Seen

Arlington, VA, April 29 -- New data released today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that *E. coli* O157:H7 infections declined 36 percent between 2002 and 2003, the largest decline ever. Since 1996, *E. coli* O157:H7 infections have declined 42 percent.

While a variety of foods have been linked to these infections, efforts by the meat industry to reduce *E. coli* O157:H7 on beef products clearly are contributing to this encouraging downward trend, according to James Hodges, president of the AMI Foundation (AMIF).

CDC also said that *Campylobacter* illnesses have dropped 28 percent, *Salmonella* illnesses have decreased by 17 percent and *Yersinia* illnesses dropped 49 percent since 1996. Illnesses caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*, which have been sharply decreasing for the last decade and which have very nearly reached the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services *Healthy People 2010* public health goal of no more than 2.5 cases per million people, showed no statistically significant increase for 2003. These data confirm that efforts to control *Listeria monocytogenes* in the meat industry are having a sustained and measurable impact on meat safety.

In releasing the data, CDC said in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports*, "The changes in the incidence of these infections occurred in the context of control measures implemented by government agencies and the food industry, enhanced food-safety education efforts, and increased attention by consumer groups and the media."

In a media teleconference, USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Elsa Murano acknowledged that the downward trends in foodborne illnesses in people and bacteria on meat and poultry products "are matching." She noted, "The reduction in *E. coli* O157:H7 illnesses brings the U.S. very close to achieving the 'Healthy People 2010' goal of 1.0 case per 100,000 people."

"Efforts by industry, efforts by individuals and efforts by regulatory agencies seem to have us headed in the right direction," said Dr. Robert Tauxe of the CDC.

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"In 2001, the AMI Foundation declared that its two priorities would be to reduce and ultimately eliminate *E. coli* O157:H7 on fresh beef products and *Listeria monocytogenes* on ready-to-eat products," Hodges said. "Data collected by USDA have demonstrated sustained decreases over time in bacteria on the products themselves. CDC's new data tell us that the enhanced safety of our products are having public health benefits."

According to Hodges, AMI member companies in 2001 declared food safety a non-competitive issue and began sharing data, technologies and ideas with one another in an effort to reduce bacteria and enhance safety. Meat processing employees have participated in numerous educational events to share "Best Practices" for control of foodborne pathogens in meat products. The industry also invested several million dollars in research aimed at finding new and better ways to eliminate bacteria.

A number of new technologies and practices have been deployed during this time period:

- Enhanced aggressive microbiological sampling and testing programs for *E. coli* O157:H7, *Listeria*, *Salmonella* and other bacteria;
- Changes to cattle feeding practices that reduce bacteria in live animals;
- Anti-pathogen technologies like steam pasteurization cabinets, steam vacuum systems and carcass washing systems in fresh meat plants that destroy bacteria on carcasses and meat cuts during processing;
- New ingredients that are added to some ready-to-eat meat and poultry products that prevent the growth of bacteria.
- New principles for sanitary design of plants producing ready-to-eat meat and poultry that help better sanitize and destroy bacteria in the environment.

These developments, resulted in promising reductions in bacteria on raw meat and poultry, announced within the last year. They include:

- Nov. 24, 2003, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that the rate of *Salmonella* in raw meat and poultry dropped by 66 percent over the past six years and by 16 percent compared with 2002;
- Oct. 17, 2003, USDA released data showing a one-year, 25 percent drop in the percentage of positive *Listeria monocytogenes* samples from ready-to-eat meat and poultry products and a 70 percent decline compared with years prior to the implementation of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) system;
- Sept. 17, 2003, USDA released data showing a drop in the number of *E. coli* O157:H7 positive samples in ground beef collected in 2003 compared with prior years. Samples collected in 2003 showed a 0.32 percent positive rates for *E. coli* O157:H7, down from 0.78 in 2002 and 0.84 in 2001. 2004 data is on track to show even more marked declines.

Research is ongoing to find additional technologies that will reduce bacteria even further.

Hodges credited USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, which has implemented new and more science-based inspection systems and provided additional, scientific training for its 6,500 federal inspectors who are in meat and poultry plants every day, assuring compliance with federal regulations.

To view charts depicting foodborne illness declines and decreases in bacteria levels on meat and poultry, visit www.AMIF.org

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