

TESTIMONY OF ELISABETH HAGEN, OF VIRGINIA, TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR  
FOOD SAFETY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Chambliss, and members of the Committee, I thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. It is a great honor to be nominated by President Obama to be the Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and to have Secretary Vilsack place his confidence in me to lead this crucial mission. Thank you, Senator Casey, for your kind words and for the great work that you do for the people of Pennsylvania and the Nation.

There are a host of reasons why I hope to serve in this position. First and foremost, I truly believe in the critical public health mission of the Food Safety and Inspection Service, FSIS. To me, there are no functions of government more important than those that protect the safety of its people. FSIS is responsible for ensuring that billions of pounds of meat, poultry, and egg products each year are safe and properly labeled. The work of this Agency has a profound impact on public health, and if confirmed, I will take very seriously this responsibility to protect consumers.

As the mother of two young children, I know that mix of hope and worry that all parents experience as we try to give our kids everything they need to lead happy and healthy lives. Like parents everywhere, I am hard-wired to protect my children from harm. So for me, and for all of us, the idea that something so fundamental as feeding our kids could actually harm them, is frightening. But yet, thousands of families each year experience this awful reality—they watch as their children become gravely ill, and even die, from contaminated food. As a mom, it is hard for me to comprehend the unspeakable pain of losing a child to foodborne illness. These stories of family heartbreak bring into sharp focus the importance of the food safety mission at USDA.

My background and experience in medicine, public health, and food safety has prepared me to lead an agency responsible for the safety of a large portion of the food supply. The work performed by FSIS is integrally linked to science and human health, and understanding pathogens like *Salmonella* and *E.coli*, and their impact on health is an essential first step.

I have been a student of human-microbe interactions in various ways for over half of my life—first as an undergraduate researcher; then as a volunteer in Honduras, where I ran a rural clinical laboratory; later in my medical subspecialty training and practice; and more recently in the Office of Public Health Science at FSIS, where my work included oversight of the laboratory system, testing programs, and outbreak investigations. As an internist and infectious disease specialist, I have led clinical research on infection risks for cancer and transplant patients. And I have personally treated and cared for many victims of foodborne illness, and know very well how these pathogens can devastate the human body and shatter families.

Since 2006, it has been my privilege to work for USDA's Food Safety & Inspection Service. I understand well the challenges of pathogen reduction, and the hazards associated with the production of meat and poultry. As a public health and science leader at FSIS, I have played a major role in efforts to address emerging issues, to improve outbreak investigations, and to communicate risk effectively. If confirmed, I look forward to using this experience to build strong, science-based, public health policy.

A growing chorus of support for food safety reform from consumers, public health partners, and industry in recent years tells us that we have a historic opportunity to make real progress.

President Obama made clear his commitment with the creation of the Food Safety Working Group in March of 2009. This effort put the federal government on a path toward a system anchored in prevention, improved inspection and enforcement, and more rapid response to outbreaks. Leading the charge at USDA is Secretary Vilsack, who is committed to driving down rates of foodborne illness. He has directed FSIS to review, from top to bottom, its existing system for ensuring food safety. If confirmed, I will hold us to the Secretary's commitment—we will need to ask the hard questions, build upon our successes, acknowledge our failures, and look to the science to move us forward.

We clearly face challenges, and there is more to do. Regardless of these challenges, consumers rightfully expect that the food they put on their tables will be safe. Recurrent outbreaks from contaminated food endanger not only the public's health, but their trust. We can, and we must do better. If confirmed, I assure you that I will work every day with that as my mandate.

Lastly, I would like to state that Secretary Vilsack has made clear his commitment to civil rights, and to a USDA where employment and program practices are fair and open to all. I share Secretary Vilsack's commitment, and, if confirmed, will not tolerate discrimination in any form in the Food Safety Mission Area at USDA.

I would again like to thank you, Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Chambliss, and the Members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear here today. If confirmed, I look forward to working with each of you, and pledge to you that I will be open and responsive to your concerns. This nomination by the President is truly humbling, and it would be my great honor to serve.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Dan, whose love and partnership make all things possible for me and for our family; my mom and dad, for their lifetime of unconditional support; and my children, Ned and Nora, who remind me every day why all of this matters so very much.