



Consumer Federation of America



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONSUMER ADVOCATES URGE USDA TO DECLARE “BIG SIX” E. COLI STECS ADULTERANTS IN BEEF

Groups Recognize Beef Company’s Decision to Begin Testing Non-O157:H7 STECs

[Washington, DC] STOP Foodborne Illness (STOP, formerly S.T.O.P. – Safe Tables Our Priority), the National Consumers League (NCL), the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), the Consumer Federation of America (CFA) and the Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention, applauded today the announcement by Beef Products, Inc. (BPI) to voluntarily expand the company’s “hold and test” program to include the six additional strains of *E. coli* identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as harmful pathogens in the food supply. The groups expressed hope that BPI’s decision to begin voluntarily testing and holding for other pathogenic *E. coli* strains in addition to *E. coli* O157:H7 will inspire the Obama administration to take additional steps to protect public health and cause the meat industry to cease their opposition to ensuring a higher level of protection for consumers.

FSIS has proposed declaring these strains as adulterants and requiring industry to sample and test for these pathogens and hold the product until final laboratory results declare the product has no detectable level of *E. coli* O157:H7 and these other six pathogenic strains of *E. coli*. The Office of Management and Budget has sidelined the proposal since January 2011.

“We now know that other strains of *E. coli* produce the powerful Shiga toxin, are similar to *E. coli* O157:H7 in virulence, and are much more prevalent than we once thought.” said Chris Waldrop, Director of Consumer Federation of America’s Food Policy Institute. “It’s time for the Obama Administration to declare these additional six strains adulterants, require robust sampling protocols by the entire industry and require all companies to hold product from commerce until a negative test result is determined.”

The six strains of non-O157:H7 Shiga-toxin producing *E. coli*, or non-O157 STEC

identified by the CDC as responsible for the majority of the non-O157 illnesses and deaths are O26, O111, O103, O45, O121 and O140. These strains, like O157, have the ability to cause Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS) which is life-threatening. Unlike other pathogens, such as *Salmonella*, it only takes a very small number of these STEC organisms to cause illness.

“These strains of *E. coli* have been identified for years as causing serious illness and even death to consumers. We have been pressing FSIS, members of Congress and anyone else who will listen about the need to keep these pathogens out of the food supply,” states STOP Foodborne Illness president, Nancy Donley. “What is it going to take to get FSIS to do the right thing and declare these six identified strains as adulterants and enact programs and standards to prevent them from reaching the marketplace? We are encouraged to see a company like BPI taking the bull by the horns and independently test for these killer pathogens before being required by government, but we need the entire industry involved and that will only happen when government mandates it.”

“We appreciate that one member of the beef industry is taking a leadership role,” said Sally Greenberg, Executive Director of the National Consumers League. “BPI is well equipped to do this, and will be able to apply their experience with sampling and hold and test for *E. coli* O157:H7 with the Big Six STECs.”

“A robust sampling program is essential to effective verification that food safety controls are working,” says Sarah Klein, an attorney with Center for Science in the Public Interest. “We’re pleased that the company is expanding their testing to include additional *E. coli* hazards and urge them and FSIS to consider antibiotic-resistant *Salmonella* known to cause illness as well. Consumers deserve protection from all of these hazards, and companies should pursue every approach to provide it.”

“Non-O157 STECs can have a significant public health impact. Many of those sickened will suffer secondary life-long medical complications. We must start tracking and condemning products contaminated with *E. coli* strains that cause human illness,” notes Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention’s CEO, Barbara Kowalcyk. “Unfortunately, a USDA proposal to declare the Big Six as adulterants in meat and poultry products has languished in the White House Office of Management and Budget. We have the technology to test for these pathogens. FSIS can and should immediately begin monitoring for the Big Six in meat and poultry products.”

While the consumer groups do not endorse companies or products and are not familiar with the specific test to be used nor the sampling protocol, the groups are pleased that BPI is taking this step to hold and test for non-O157:H7 STECs and encourage others in the industry to do the same. The consumer groups strongly urge OMB to finalize FSIS’ proposal to immediately declare the “Big Six” non-O157 STEC adulterants and put a robust and meaningful testing regiment in place.

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The Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing foodborne illness through research, education, advocacy and service.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest is a non-profit consumer advocacy and education organization that focuses largely on food safety and nutrition issues. It is supported principally by the 850,000 subscribers to its Nutrition Action Healthletter and by foundation grants.

The Consumer Federation of America is a nonprofit association of nearly 300 consumer groups that, since 1968, has sought to advance the consumer interest through research, advocacy, and education.

The National Consumers League is the nation's oldest consumer organization, representing consumers on marketplace and workplace issues.

STOP Foodborne Illness is a national nonprofit public health organization dedicated to the prevention of illness and death from foodborne pathogens by advocating for sound public policy, building public awareness and assisting those impacted by foodborne illness.

Contact:

Barbara Kowalczyk, Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention, 724-58-0767

Sarah Klein, Center for Science in the Public Interest, 202-332-9110

Chris Waldrop, Consumer Federation of America, 202-797-8551

Sally Greenberg, National Consumers League, 202-835-3323

Nancy Donley, STOP Foodborne Illness, 773-269-6555