Feds Consider Poultry Slaughter Inspection Changes

MARY SELL,The Decatur Daily

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The average American eats about 80 pounds of chicken per year, and Alabama produces more than a billion chickens each year, making it the third-largest producer in the country.

But federal poultry inspectors in north Alabama are raising concerns that chicken could become more dangerous if the U.S. Department of Agriculture approves slaughter inspection changes now under consideration.

Among other things, those changes would:

— Decrease from four to one the number of federal inspectors who look at the butchered carcasses as they move down a conveyor belt;

— Increase the maximum speed of those processing lines to 175 birds per minute;

— Alter the guidelines for how companies test for bacteria such as E. coli.

It's not clear when the proposal, which is known as HIMP and has been tested at 20 plants — including four in Alabama — for more than a decade, could be rolled out nationwide.

Proponents said the improvements will save taxpayers and poultry processors millions of dollars a year while making the final food products safer for consumers by relying more on testing for bacteria — something inspectors aren't likely to see.

They argue federal employees shouldn't be spending their time looking for cosmetic flaws such as bumps and bruises on the birds — and that part of the inspection process can be handed over to the companies to monitor.

"The modernization plan will protect public health, improve the efficiency of poultry inspections in the U.S., and reduce spending," U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement announcing the proposal earlier this year. "The new inspection system will reduce the risk of foodborne illness by focusing (USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service) inspection activities on those tasks that advance our core mission of food safety."

But inspectors who have seen the pilot system in Alabama poultry plants said reducing inspectors while decreasing the amount of time the remaining inspector has to look at the birds does not equal safer food.

"The lines are so fast, one-third of a second per bird," said Phyllis McKelvey, a

retired federal inspector from Albertville. "You tell me you can thoroughly inspect that bird for disease and contaminants in one-third of a second."

Most processing plants have four federal inspectors monitoring at a rate of 140 birds per minute.

According to the agency, the changes will save taxpayers more than $90 million during three years and lower production costs at least $256.6 million per year.

Stan Painter, an inspector from Crossville and president of the southern council of the inspectors' union, wondered why the USDA was trying to save private companies money.

"As a regulatory agency, why are we interested in how much the industry is going to save?" asked Painter, who said he was speaking for the union and not the USDA. "We should be interested in saving — saving people from getting sick."

Proponents said the union is against the modification because it will eliminate some inspector jobs. But some food safety groups also have spoken against it.

"USDA inspectors receive extensive training to protect public health in poultry facilities, but there is no similar requirement for company employees to receive training before they assume these inspection responsibilities in the proposed privatized inspection system," the group Food & Water Watch said in a statement. "... A recent Food & Water Watch analysis of a pilot program for these cuts found an appalling amount of defective and unsanitary poultry contaminated with feces, bile and feathers got through."

McKelvey worked in one of the pilot facilities before she retired in 2010. In a petition against the changes that she posted on the website Change.org, McKelvey paints an appetite-ruining picture.

"(Under HIMP) inspectors can no longer see all parts of the bird, which causes them to overlook contaminated chicken and turkey with lesions, bruises, and tumors," she wrote.

"... The jobs that highly trained inspectors once did are now handed over to untrained workers at the poultry plant. The workers don't have the power to question their supervisors. The overwhelming speeds of the lines result in more worker injuries."

Tom Super, a spokesman for the National Chicken Council, a trade organization that represents chicken producers and processors, called the proposal a logical next step in the modernization of the industry, which has been operating under the same rules since the Eisenhower administration.

Ray Hillburn of the Alabama Egg and Poultry Association agreed.

"It's changing their rules to keep up with technology," he said. "It did not come from

the poultry industry, but the USDA."

Hillburn said none of his organization's members are against the proposed changes.

"It will be more efficient," he said.

Super said having USDA employees at the front of the inspection process — where they look for things like too many feathers on a carcass — probably isn't the best use of their time.

"Company employees would take over more quality control," Super said. "That frees up the USDA inspector to look for things that really are of a public health concern.

"From a taxpayer perspective, do you want your money going to the USDA going toward quality defects on a bird, or things that have the potential to make people sick?"

But Painter argues that company employees aren't in the position to be making quality control judgments, and employees could be punished for slowing the lines.

"When you're a plant employee, you either do what you're told or you go to the house," Painter said.

Meanwhile, the proposal also changes how plants test for E. coli, removing the current requirement that companies test the cleaned carcasses after they've been chilled and "allow establishment to use other, more relevant indicators of process control." The FSIS proposes that companies collect samples for analysis at the pre-chill and post-chill points in the process.

Industry officials said they've improved testing through the years, but it's not a perfect system. The Associated Press reported in 2011 that an outbreak of salmonella poisoning linked to Cargill ground turkey sickened at least 136 people and killed one, prompting a recall of 36 million pounds of turkey.

Similar changes have been recommended for turkey processing.

Birds are big business in Alabama. Broilers are the No. 1 agricultural product in the state.

In 2010, the state ranked third in the nation in broiler production, behind Georgia and Arkansas, with more than 1 billion birds, worth about $2.7 billion. The counties that produce the most chickens are Cullman, DeKalb, Marshall and Coffee, according to the state Department of Agriculture.

And those birds are most likely butchered at processing plants scattered around the state.

While the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries monitors the processing of cattle and some other livestock in the state, it does not do the same

for poultry.

"It's not that we at the Department of Agriculture don't have an interest in public health, but in our state, inspection of commercial poultry is done completely by FSIS," state veterinarian Dr. Tony Frazier said. "We do not interact with the inspection of poultry."

That's in part because it is such a large industry and would take more manpower than the department has available.

While opponents of the changes said the chicken companies shouldn't be the ones inspecting their products, Super said they have an economic incentive to train their employees to look for the same defects that federal employees would.

Even if the USDA approves the proposed inspection rules, they will be voluntary, Super said. They also will cost companies, Super said.

"It would make them more efficient, but you don't just flip on a switch and increase line speeds," he said. Additional equipment, and possibly employees, will likely have to be added.

"There will be an initial investment up front," he said. "Companies, if they choose to implement this system, will have to hire more employees. This will be a job creator."

The Southern Poverty Law Center, a human-rights group based in Montgomery, is urging the USDA against increasing conveyor belt speeds.

"The proposed rule is not merely an authorization to speed up slaughtering and processing lines," the SPLC said in a 10-page letter to the USDA. "Because of competition in the industry, the proposed rule is in effect a mandate that all plants operate under the 'modernized' process at maximum speeds of 175 birds per minute. Given the estimate that the corporations in this industry will reap additional annual profits of $259 million, any plants that do not swiftly begin to operate at the proposed new maximum speed, whether due to concern for worker safety or for other reasons, will be unable to compete with those that speed up immediately.

"The proposed rule would expose workers throughout the industry to more frequent and more severe repetitive motion disorders and other injuries, and should be withdrawn."

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