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REMARKS BY: TOMMY G. THOMPSON, SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
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HHS & FDA: Food Security & Food Safety Press Conference

Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for coming today to hear about one of our important issues. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Mark McClellan of FDA for being here and all the hard work that he and his staff continue to do for the benefit of Americans.

I'm pleased to be here today to update you on all that we at HHS are doing to protect the nation's food supply from a terrorist attack. We work to ensure that the food that American families put on their tables each day is as safe and secure as possible.

When I first arrived at HHS, I was quite surprised and disappointed to learn that we are responsible for 80 percent of food import exams - but only received 20 percent of the food safety money in the federal budget. I was even more shocked to learn how few of the food imports we inspected.

This is an inequity and a shortfall that we at the Department resolved to change, a commitment that only intensified with tremendous bipartisan support after September the 11th and the anthrax attacks of 2001, which showed the lengths that some people would take to show their hatred for the people of this wonderful country.

That commitment quickly turned into action. In fiscal years 2002 and 2003, we spent nearly \$195 million on food safety - an unprecedented investment of new resources that was going to be able to create tangible results for American families.

Consider:

In 2001 we had only 150 food import inspectors. With the additional resources since then, FDA hired 655 new people who work almost exclusively on food security and food safety.

Just two years ago, FDA officials were able to conduct 12,000 food exams at our nation's ports of entry. America has about 50 to 60 major ports and 300 total points of entry for imports.

So far this year, we have already conducted 62,000 food exams. That's five times the number in 2001.

Quintupling the number of exams in two short years is a remarkable achievement - one we're proud of. But we certainly are not satisfied.

That is why President Bush has asked Congress for \$116 million for the HHS food safety budget for fiscal year 2004 - almost 20 percent more than this year, to protect the food that is imported into America and put on our nation's dinner tables every night.

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We are not done though. We are committed to making sure Americans can feel very secure that the food they eat is safe and healthy, and we are working harder than ever to enhance security.

And today I am also announcing that 5 million dollars of supplemental funding will support our food security research initiative. This money comes from the post-9/11 Emergency Response Fund that was appropriated this past year. It will allow us to develop technologies and strategies to prevent and minimize potential threats to the safety and security of the nation's food supply. Here are a few of the things we will do with this additional money.

We will develop ways to continuously assess foods for chemical, biological, and radiological contamination and determine how to eliminate them through processing.

We will develop ways to isolate microbial agents and improve the analytical methods that we can use in the field to detect them.

We will develop ways to prevent contamination of animal feed, which is so very important.

We will develop risk assessment tools so we can identify critical control points within a food security system. We will develop methods for decontaminating food processing facilities and foods stores.

And we will develop computer programs that will be able to improve our response time in food emergencies.

This research initiative is part of FDA's new 10-point program to improve the safety and security of America's food supply. Mark will discuss this more in a moment, but the strategy involves:

Making the federal, state, local, and tribal governments and the free market more aware of current food security issues.

Increasing our ability to identify specific threats and attacks on America's food supply.

Protecting the food supply from those terrorist threats.

The safety and security of our food supply is an issue of vital importance to each and every American. People need to be confident that the food they give their families is absolutely safe, and they need to be confident that we are taking all reasonable steps in our Department to protect the food supply.

Thank you, Mark, for leading FDA's fight for all Americans