

**Opening Remarks for Darci Vetter
Deputy Under Secretary for
Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services
Global Food Safety Policy Forum
Ronald Reagan Building & International Trade Center
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INTRODUCTION

Good morning everyone. My name is Darci Vetter and I am the Deputy Under Secretary for the Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In that role, I largely have responsibility for the international side of the Department, including trade and international development and the department's international food assistance programs. Food safety and strong food safety systems are essential components of each of these aspects of my work.

But my first experience with food safety issues and the importance of food safety measures came at a much younger age, and a much more hands-on level. My family owns a small grain cleaning and processing business in rural Nebraska. And for several summers of my life, my summer job was to hold open a small microwave popcorn bag, press a pedal with my foot until the next batch of popcorn filled it, and slide the now full bag of microwave popcorn down a chute until it rolled down the conveyor belt and into the machine that would seal the bag. And although you might think it was the repetitive, mind-numbing nature of this work that I would have hated most about this summer job, it wasn't. For this teenage girl, the worst part was the hair net. It was itchy, and hot, and heaven forbid any of my friends would ever see me in it.

But for my father, that hair net, or pair of rubber gloves, or the manual containing proper cleaning and testing procedures, was an essential part of his business. And my failure to wear it, or properly sweep and vacuum the grain dust, or to wash out and sterilize the hopper tank, could mean serious economic damage--through a returned or refused order from a customer, spoilage of product, not to mention what might happen if the product made someone ill or otherwise caused harm.

And my father's experience is repeated throughout the globe by countless others in the food business, both large and small, every single day.

Today, food supply chains are global in nature, with ingredients grown in one country, processed or prepared in a second or third country and distributed and consumed in yet another country or region of the world. To take just one example, more than 80 percent of U.S. seafood is imported, and comes from 136 countries. Thirty-eight percent of global soybean production and 30 percent of cotton was exported last year.

Since 2000, global trade in agricultural products has increased 150 percent to an estimated \$700 billion in 2011. By 2020, some economists project that global food trade will top \$1 trillion.

Brand new food products and new methods of food preparation are introduced all the time, offering consumer benefits and variety, but sometimes raising new food safety challenges as well. And while more and more consumers expect a greater variety of foods, they are also paying more attention to where their food comes from and are demanding to know more about how businesses and governments protect food safety.

FOOD SECURITY

USDA's Economic Research Service estimates that nearly 850 million people in 77 lower-income countries are food insecure, and the situation could grow worse in the poorest countries. By 2050, the world's population will reach 9.1 billion, 34 percent higher than today.

We are challenged to produce more food, and higher quality food, using land and water resources that are increasingly scarce. We simply cannot afford to waste those resources or calories in the chain between when that food is harvested and eaten. It is essential that we think about food safety at each step of the process--be it the storage, transport, processing, packaging or preparation of that food on its way to your mouth, and other hungry mouths worldwide.

If we are to meet this challenge, all of us must work together to build robust food safety systems based on science and international standards to improve public health and facilitate trade in food and food products. That's why I'm so pleased to see this morning's gathering of government officials, the private sector, academia, NGOs, and foundations, all focused on this goal, and ready to dive into today's forum.

Each of these different stakeholders has much to bring to the table and to gain by collaborating on food safety issues as well.

Governments are charged to develop and maintain food safety policies and regimes that provide the level of protection they desire. They can work with industry to make sure their regulations are clear. They need to have access to needed technologies to implement and enforce these standards. For example, they can use these technologies to compare, and where appropriate adopt, the standards and methods employed by others to see whether they can provide the same protections while reducing trade barriers into their country, and for their exporting companies, who benefit from a unified approach.

For business, its reputation depends upon a consistent, safe supply of food, and on their ability to consistently meet safety standards. They also need to know how their product is going to be evaluated—and ensure consistency of methodologies at each testing site or port of entry, so they can make sure their products are in compliance.

Academia and organizations train the next generation of food safety professionals, giving them the opportunity to collaborate with food safety decision makers. Members of academia are developing new food safety technologies and methodologies for assessing food safety. They get hands-on access to training and firsthand experience with some of the latest innovations.

And as you watch how we learn, and what techniques have worked best to inspire learning, you can help us duplicate them in the future.

I am encouraged and inspired this morning not only by the tremendous human capital in the audience, but also the events you have planned for this week.

There is no better illustration of both the collaborative effort and the win-win possibilities for food safety than the opening of the International Food Safety Training Laboratory at the Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition at the University of Maryland. I truly congratulate JIFSAN and the Waters Corporation on the successful opening of this facility.

This is the world's first hands-on training laboratory dedicated to helping governments and manufacturers adapt technologies and food safety testing methods to ensure their exports meet regulatory standards. It has the capacity to train domestic and international government and industry scientists on regulations and best practices for food safety testing methods. This is the first of many facilities to be developed around the world and I am hopeful that it will set the standard for international cooperation and education.

INTERNATIONAL APPROACH

The United States is actively seeking opportunities like the laboratory and today's forum, to encourage international regulatory cooperation in a number of areas, and food safety is certainly no exception. Just as the food we eat is becoming more international, so must our approach to ensuring that it is safe and nutritious for our consumers. When just one link in our global supply chains breaks down, there can be strong ripple effects throughout the rest of the supply chain and our economies. Every \$1 billion of U.S. agricultural exports equals 8,400 jobs, and an additional \$1.4 billion in economic activity here in the United States. That exported agricultural product, be it an apple, a chicken leg, or an Oreo cookie, may have been processed, shipped, marketed or advertised, before leaving the U.S. port. And I suspect the economic ripple effect would be greater if we continued measuring the impact outside our borders, for example, the pork loin from Iowa helped employ the chef and waiter at the restaurant in China, or how U.S. almonds became ingredients in Indian pastry.

If a market is closed to that almond, or that apple, those other activities (the shipping company, and the pastry chef) are impacted, too—and unfortunately, the market disruptions are often the result of food safety controls or trade measures that are not based on the latest science, methods, or international standards. When it comes to food safety, where technical scientific information is involved, and where countries can feel great pressure to act quickly, we must cooperate to keep those breaks in the global supply chain from occurring, and to mitigate their impact when they do.

There are two particular fora that I want to mention where international commitment is critical.

The first is our commitment to the development and implementation of international standards, specifically the science-based work of Codex Alimentarius and other international standard-setting bodies. Codex is the body recognized by the World Trade Organization for international food standards, working under the umbrella of FAO and the World Health Organization.

Through its more than 180 member countries, Codex sets standards that protect the health of consumers and that facilitate trade.

The role of organizations such as Codex is growing in importance as world trade grows. Countries can look to Codex's science-based standards and guidance to provide a global benchmark for best practices in the production and trade of food and agriculture, and can feel confident that setting standards based on Codex guidance means they have a strong international consensus behind it, even when countries may lack the capacity to conduct full risk assessments themselves.

We are also greatly encouraged by the work we have accomplished through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group, and see great promise for future work. APEC's Food Safety Cooperation Forum has played a strong role in promoting the use of good regulatory practices, and greater alignment of APEC economies' technical regulations and standards.

The APEC member economies are also working to improve agricultural technologies to adapt to 21st century needs. If we are to address international food security and environmental challenges, our farmers will need access to new agricultural technologies that will increase their productivity while putting less stress on the environment.

Each year, new products are commercialized that can aid food production, but adoption is often limited by regulatory issues. Improved, consistent regulatory systems are critical to the expanded use and trade of products derived from new technologies such as genetically engineered seeds and new, safer, pesticides.

APEC members see the importance of these issues, particularly those with developing economies where food price increases and production issues have a greater relative impact. However, these economies also tend to have less ability to implement effective, functioning regulatory systems.

We see great promise in APEC as well as its Partnership Training Institute Network. That network has undertaken dozens of activities in the APEC region focusing on export certification and harmonization, risk analysis, food safety incident management, and laboratory capacity building. Those activities work hand-in-hand to emphasize the importance of cooperation when it comes to food safety around the world.

I know I look forward to working with members of APEC to develop transparent and science-based regulatory systems that are consistent with international standards. These are necessary to enable governments to strengthen food security, facilitate trade in food and agriculture, improve farm income, and facilitate investment in the development of innovative technologies.

CONCLUSION

All of you are here today because you have a vested interest in food safety policy and ensuring we have the tools necessary to ensure the safety of all of the world's citizens. I encourage you to build upon the successful collaborations in the past year and talk to your colleagues here today and take advantage of the vast knowledge of the people in this room.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you all today about the importance of global food safety, the impact of international policies to keep our food safe and how we can work together to set and maintain international standards for food safety.

I want to thank you all again for participating in this forum and to all the organizers and sponsors who made this event possible. I also wish you much success in your discussions and trust that this forum will pave the way to future collaboration on the important topic of global food safety. Thank you.