

NEW SWINE INSPECTION SYSTEM: AN OVERVIEW

The New Swine Inspection System (NSIS) rule by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) provides swine slaughter establishments with an alternative to the current inspection system. NSIS will allow FSIS inspectors more time to focus attention on verifying food safety and animal welfare requirements, and will stimulate food safety innovation. The NSIS rule is based on a pilot program FSIS initiated more than 15 years ago, giving the agency a wealth of data and deep knowledge base from which to establish NSIS.

Under NSIS, plant employees in swine slaughter establishments that chose to enter the program would conduct the manual sorting activities for defects in carcasses and parts currently handled by entry-level FSIS workers. Critically, just like all slaughter plants today, FSIS inspectors will continue to inspect 100% of live animals prior to slaughter and all carcasses after slaughter.

Line speeds

Under the current inspection system, maximum inspection rates were established to define the number of FSIS online inspectors required to inspect carcasses based on the number of carcasses an individual could reasonably evaluate in a period of time. Animal disease prevalence is much lower today than when these limits were set. Innovations in animal housing, genetics, and processing have since been implemented, improving livestock conditions at presentation, and line speeds have not been reevaluated since these improvements.

Plants involved in the FSIS pilot program have not operated at speeds significantly faster than the current maximum.¹ Line speeds are adjusted in all plants to optimize efficiencies without jeopardizing worker safety, animal welfare, food safety, or quality. Line speeds depend on many factors, such as livestock conditions, staffing, equipment capabilities, and food safety controls.

NSIS comes with new, additional requirements, such as monitoring to ensure process control.

Plants would only run at speeds that maintain food safety, worker safety, animal welfare, and quality. FSIS would constantly verify plants are maintaining food safety process control.

Sorting activities

Plant workers would conduct the manual sorting activities currently done by entry level FSIS workers. After plant sorting activities, FSIS would still inspect 100% of live animals before slaughter and carcasses just after slaughter, along with more verification inspections. FSIS would have authority to take control if a plant improperly sorts.

Will there be less FSIS Inspection?

No. Although there would be fewer entry level FSIS employees at the plant because the company is performing the manual sorting activities, there would be more higher level FSIS staff verifying food safety and animal welfare.

Is this new system safe for workers?

Yes. FSIS' preliminary comparative analysis from 2002 to 2010 shows that pilot program establishments had lower mean injury rates than non-pilot program establishments.²

The most valuable asset at any plant is the employees, which is why plants are committed to continuously evaluating worker safety. Plants modify processes, implement innovative equipment, or create additional job positions to ensure each worker's load is manageable.

The meat industry as a whole has continued to reduce injuries, at an all-time low rate of 5.3 total recordable cases per 100 full-time workers per year. By way of comparison, the injury rate for ambulance services is 7.8 and frozen cake, pie, and pastry manufacturing is 7.3.³ Notwithstanding, the improvement, the meat industry is committed to lowering the injury rate even further.

How does this stimulate innovation?

NSIS allows FSIS to make better use of agency resources and conduct more offline activities to ensure food safety and animal welfare.

Plants will have the flexibility to reconfigure the slaughter floor, currently limited by stringent regulations on FSIS inspection locations and station sizes. Plants could also use technological advancements and innovative techniques to make presentation and inspection more efficient.

References:

^{1, 2} 83 *Federal Register* 4796

³ Employer-Reported Workplace Injuries and Illnesses. <https://www.bls.gov/web/osh.supp.toc.htm>. Accessed 7/10/19.