
NEW SWINE INSPECTION SYSTEM: FAQ

Why is USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) implementing a new pork inspection system?

FSIS is tasked with inspecting and ensuring the safety of meat products and part of that charge involves exploring ways to meet those goals more efficiently. As part of that effort, the agency has operated for 15 years a pilot program called HACCP Inspection Models Project or "HIMP," which has proven successful.

Based on that experience, FSIS is offering a program, the New Swine Inspection System (NSIS), modeled after HIMP, to swine slaughter plants that request it if they can meet the program's requirements.

Some plants may choose to shift to NSIS and other plants may choose to operate under traditional inspection. Each plant will decide which system is best based on a variety of factors.

Does New Swine Inspection System eliminate line speed limits in hog slaughter plants?

Plants that elect to operate under NSIS are subject to different oversight of their line speeds. Plants are not capped at 1,106 pigs per hour, but can operate no faster than they are able to comply with food safety rules. Specifically, "Establishments operating under NSIS must reduce their line speed as directed by the Inspector-in-Charge (IIC)."¹

In effect, the requirement to comply with food safety rules imposes a line speed limit.

By analogy, it's like a newspaper editor telling the print shop, "You may run the printer at the speed you choose, but you may not smear the ink or tear the paper." Meeting these requirements imposes limits on the speed with which a plant may operate.

How fast did plants operate under the pilot program?

FSIS's analysis shows that plants operating under the pilot program averaged line speeds of 1,099 head per hour, with speeds varying from 885 head per hour to 1,295 head per hour. FSIS states, "Although they are authorized to do so, market hog HIMP establishments do not operate at line speeds that are significantly faster than the current maximum line speeds for market hogs."²

Do plants always operate at the same speed?

No. Plants may adjust line speeds from day to day depending on a variety of factors. Depending on the condition of the livestock being processed, a plant may need to perform tasks differently and adjust its speed accordingly. Likewise, a plant may be short staffed or equipment may not work properly, which may require line speed adjustments.

Are injury rates higher in plants that operate under this system?

"FSIS compared establishment injury rates between HIMP and traditional establishments from 2002 to 2010. The preliminary analysis shows that HIMP establishments had lower mean injury rates than non-HIMP establishments."³

Plants that elect to operate under NSIS must provide safety attestations annually. In addition, FSIS inspectors have the authority to reduce speeds if they believe the line speed poses a worker safety risk.

How safe are U.S. meat plants for workers?

According to the most recent (2017) data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), "animal slaughtering and processing" injuries reached an all-time low of 4.8 total recordable cases per 100 full-time workers per year. This rate decrease from 2016, during which animal slaughtering injuries were 5.3 per 100 full-time workers.

As context, dozens of industries have significantly higher injury rates than the meat industry, including motor home manufacturing (10.3 total), ski facilities (10.2 total), ambulance services (7.1 total), and soft drink manufacturing (6.6 total).⁴

Do slower line speeds create safer workplaces?

Although it's tempting to focus on line speed alone, the real issue in ensuring both food and employee safety is whether a line is staffed appropriately for the speed.

A line moving at a certain speed might be unsafe with four workers, but safe with six workers doing the tasks. Appropriate crewing of a line is key to safety.

Will plant employees replace federal inspectors?

Under NSIS, plant employees conduct certain manual labor tasks so FSIS inspectors can focus on more technical food safety tasks, which is a more appropriate use of an inspector's time and expertise. However, inspectors still have oversight of the employee-performed tasks. Inspectors, also, continue to inspect 100 percent of live animals prior to slaughter and all carcasses after slaughter.

References:

¹ 9 CFR 310.26(c)

^{2,3} 83 *Federal Register*. Feb. 1, 2018. Page 4796

⁴ Employer-Reported Workplace Injuries and Illnesses. <https://www.bls.gov/web/osh.supp.toc.htm>. Accessed 8/8/19.