



The Safe Line Speeds in COVID-19 Act and U.S. Department of Agriculture's New Swine Slaughter Inspection System

Representatives Marcia Fudge, Rosa DeLauro, and Bennie Thompson have introduced H.R. 7521, the Safe Line Speeds in COVID-19 Act. Companion legislation has been introduced in the Senate by Sen. Corey Booker. The bill would, in part, require the Secretary of Agriculture to suspend any waiver related to line speeds in covered establishments and suspend implementation of, and conversion to, the New Swine Slaughter Inspection system for the duration of the COVID-19 emergency period.

Background on the New Swine Slaughter Inspection System

On October 1, 2019, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) finalized a rule to modernize swine slaughter inspection by establishing the New Swine Slaughter Inspection System (NSIS). Participation in NSIS is voluntary. NSIS is based on FSIS's 15-year pilot project, the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP)-Based Inspection Models Project (HIMP). Oversight of HIMP was conducted by the Bush, Obama, and Trump Administrations.

In both traditional and NSIS plants, FSIS inspects 100 percent of live animals prior to slaughter and all carcasses after slaughter. NSIS allows FSIS inspection personnel to conduct more verification tasks and imposes additional requirements for plants, resulting in additional data to assess a plant's food safety system.

Line Speeds

Under the traditional inspection system, maximum inspection rates were set decades ago to establish the number of FSIS online inspectors required to inspect carcasses, based on the number of carcasses an inspector could reasonably evaluate in a period of time. A key consideration then was animal disease, which is much less prevalent today than when the limits were set. Line speeds have not been reevaluated since these improvements.

Line speeds in NSIS plants may operate no faster than they are able to maintain process control and comply with food and worker safety rules. In all plants – traditional and NSIS – line speeds are adjusted 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. Simply put, establishments do not run the line as fast as it can go and walk away. Line speed is constantly monitored and adjusted, as needed, by the establishment and FSIS.

- FSIS inspectors' authority to direct an establishment to reduce line speed or stop the line is the same in NSIS plants as in traditional plants.
- FSIS found HIMP establishments did not operate at line speeds significantly faster than the maximum line speeds for traditional hog slaughter.
- Proponents of the legislation have not presented any evidence demonstrating a difference between COVID transmission in traditional and NSIS establishments. Thanks to community outreach and education, coupled with controls put in place at meat and poultry plants of all types and sizes, illnesses among meat and poultry workers have reduced to the point that many plants are running at full capacity.