

After Action Report

Operation Apple Blossom

FSIS-State Food Defense Partnership Exercise

January 8, 2009

Food Safety and Inspection Service

**Final Report
February 4, 2009**

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) are actively addressing the need to maintain the safety and defense of the country's supply of meat, poultry, and egg products. During a crisis, it is critical that the Department be able to efficiently and effectively coordinate with its counterparts at the state and local level, as well as within other Federal agencies and the private sector. On January 8, 2009, FSIS conducted a tabletop exercise, "Operation Apple Blossom", in Springdale, AR and at FSIS headquarters in Washington, DC. The exercise focused on the roles of Federal, state, and local government agencies and the meat, poultry and egg products industry to work together to detect, prepare, respond to, and recover from a significant incident activity. Emphasis was placed on a team approach to incident response, coordination, integration of capabilities, problem identification, communications, and resolution through preparation, response, recovery, and multi-agency coordination. The exercise provided FSIS the opportunity to test and validate operating guidelines and directives for responding to a significant incident activity involving the intentional adulteration of meat products within an FSIS regulated facility. The ultimate goals were:

- protecting public health,
- minimizing suffering, loss of life, and personal injury;
- minimizing damage to property; and
- minimizing disaster- or emergency-related service disruption, which would have an adverse impact on the government, the communities, and the businesses and their employees, reputation, and meat products.

This report identifies areas of strengths and weaknesses that were observed during the exercise and offers recommendations for improvement.

Objectives

Operation Apple Blossom focused on enhancing the coordination and communication between FSIS, other regional federal agencies, state and local government agencies, and industry stakeholders. The objectives for the exercise were to clarify roles and responsibilities and improve coordination and communication among:

- FSIS Program Offices and associated field staffs;
- state and local public health, law enforcement and emergency response agencies;
- primary Federal emergency response organizations;
- private sector stakeholders in the meat industry; and the
- academic community.

Strengths of the Exercise – What Worked Well?

The exercise involved participation by the following stakeholder groups:

- FSIS field and Headquarters personnel from the Office of Field Operations, Office of Program Enforcement, Evaluation, and Review, Office of Public Health Science, Office of International Affairs, Office of Management, Office of Policy and Program Development, Office Public Affairs and Consumer Education, Office of Outreach, Employee Education and Training, and Office of Data Integration and Food Protection;
- staff from the Department of Homeland Security, Food and Drug Administration, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and USDA's Office of Inspector General;
- state of Arkansas government agencies, included the Arkansas Department of Health, Arkansas Livestock and Poultry, and Arkansas Department of Emergency Management;
- local government agencies, included the Arkansas Department of Health – Washington County Health Department, Washington County Sheriff's Office, and Washington County Department of Emergency Management
- food industry, included Sysco Corporation; Tyson Foods, Inc.; Butterball LLC; and U.S. Poultry & Egg Association
- academia included the University of Arkansas, Center of Excellence for Poultry Science

Participants were actively engaged in the exercise. There was open dialogue and good networking among all stakeholder groups.

A number of government agency participants commented on the value of the strong industry participation in this exercise.

A key strength of this exercise was the coordinated public health response afforded by the unified structure of the Arkansas Department of Health, with local county health units, which facilitates rapid and effective communication.

Areas for Improvement – What Did Not Work Well in the Exercise?

Exercise Structure

Participant comments about the exercise structure included:

- a simulated Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was needed to move participants toward operations in line with the National Response Framework Incident Command/Unified Command System. An EOC was discussed but not played out for this exercise.
- it would be helpful to establish a Multi-Agency Coordination (MAC) System to set priorities and allocate resources;
- there was limited discussion or consideration of jurisdictional authorities;
- include representatives from Federal Bureau of Investigation, Environmental Protection Agency, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the state Department of Environmental Quality to address criminal investigation, product disposal and facility decontamination, and workplace protection;
- include representatives from state laboratories and agency public information officers, and additional representatives from local and state law enforcement; and
- more emphasis should be placed on the recall and effectiveness checks process in Phase 3 of the exercise scenario.

Communication/Coordination - need to clarify how the Arkansas Department of Health can issue advisories to the public that are as timely as possible yet coordinated with messaging by federal agencies.

Incident Command System (ICS) Issues

What triggered each stakeholder group to organize into or participate in a multi-agency incident command structure?

- Local government – large number of illnesses;
- state of Arkansas – local ICS due to reported illnesses; increasing number of illnesses triggered State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) activation;
- FSIS – evidence of food product tampering;
- industry – video showing questionable activity; and

- other Federal Agencies – criminal investigation.

What was the effectiveness of the ICS structure for this exercise?

- Local government – the EOC/Unified Command and Joint Information Center are hub for all agencies to cooperate and develop coordinated public messaging;
- state of Arkansas – ICS structure was effective;
- FSIS – effective; and
- industry – varied; participated “with” but not “in” ICS

Who was in charge?

- Local government – Department of Health/local Emergency Operations Center;
- state of Arkansas – local and state health departments during Phases 1 and 2, then shift to federal regulatory agencies;
- FSIS – varied; public health and law enforcement;
- industry – depends. FSIS in charge of plant activities; local and state public health in charge of investigating cases; local law enforcement, then USDA OIG in charge of criminal investigation; and
- other Federal Agencies – FBI for law enforcement

Were decisions coordinated among stakeholder groups?

- Local government – yes, through Unified Command;
- state of Arkansas – decisions were fairly well coordinated;
- FSIS – yes; open communications; and
- industry – apparently yes, but from outside versus inside industry, and recall decision could have been better coordinated.

Other Observations

- Local government suggested that industry should contact the Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) at each of their plant locations as a way to participate in established government emergency response organizations.
- An observation was made that criteria for sampling of patient specimens and food samples for chemical contaminants should be developed.
- One participant suggested that the exercises include the opportunity for 360 degree evaluations. For example, how was the overall state response perceived by local government, federal agencies, and industry? How was FSIS' response perceived by state and local government?
- Allow additional time (an extra day) for the exercise to further develop some of the issues discussed.
- The exercise should be run in Washington, DC with participation by federal agency mid-level managers.