Share Your FSIS Stories and Snapshots!

Continue to send articles and photos to Beacon@usda.gov. Articles must be original works that have been cleared by your supervisor and contain the author’s name and contact information. Submissions should not exceed 150 words. The editorial staff will edit submissions for content and length.

High-resolution photos must be submitted as a separate attachment in .jpg format. Provide a media release form for photos of individuals under 18 years of age.

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Honoring the Dedicated Public Servants of FSIS

By Felicia Thompson, OPACE

The first week in May each year is Public Service Recognition Week, an opportunity for the public to honor government employees at all levels for their service and dedication to make life better for us all. FSIS employees exemplify this service and dedication.

For nearly 160 years, Americans have depended upon public servants to keep our food safe. Today, approximately 8,700 FSIS employees continue to ensure that meat, poultry and egg products are safe and wholesome. They’re also serving outside of the Agency and applying their professional training, expertise and passions to other causes.

Since February, employees with clinical training have volunteered to deploy and administer COVID-19 vaccinations to people in Maryland, Nevada and Oklahoma. Others have deployed to the Southwest border to assist the Department of Health and Human Services, with processing the influx of unaccompanied minors coming into the country. These examples show the dedication of FSIS employees to helping our country wherever the need.

I am a career civil servant and a public affairs specialist with the Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education. Prior to FSIS, I served my country as a member of the military. I am proud to continue my public service as the person who communicates with FSIS employees on behalf of the Agency through the FSIS Feedback mailbox. Since March 2020, I have responded to employees’ questions about COVID-19, leave, staffing, training, Agency resources (e.g., the Employee Assistance Program) and more recently, the Agency’s new website design. FSIS leadership has entrusted me to be that bridge between them and the team. It’s a responsibility that I do not take lightly – I ensure the flow of information from leadership to employees and back again is clear, concise and responsive. This role has allowed me to directly impact the lives of members of the FSIS team and their families. Read more perspectives from your FSIS public servant colleagues.

Suzanne Hensell, OPACE, contributed to this article.

Felicia Thompson, OPACE

On March 13, Office of Field Operations Consumer Safety Inspector Carolyn Grant volunteered at a community COVID-19 vaccination event in Jefferson County, Arkansas. More than 200 people received vaccinations that day. Grant is assigned to Establishment 13456, an export, meat and poultry processing and slaughter plant in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Photo by Earlene Holland, OFO.

USDA has deployed more than 630 personnel, 32 of whom were FSIS employees, including a microbiologist, a consumer safety inspector, and up to 6 veterinarians at a given time. Read about the April Beacon article “Vaccination Heroes” on the FSIS website.

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The Beacon

PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH FOOD SAFETY

This is the final issue of The Beacon. We are teaming up with the Wednesday Newsline to bring you Food for Thought, a weekly eNewsletter. Read more on page 4.
Asian American and Pacific Islander Contributions to our Nation’s History

By Suzanne Hensell, OPACE

Every May, National Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month is celebrated to commemorate the immigration of the first Japanese to the United States on May 7, 1843, and the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869 (the majority of the workers who laid the tracks were Chinese immigrants).

Among the AAPI communities’ contributions to America’s rich heritage are:

- Birthright Citizenship: After a year-long battle between Wong Kim Ark (born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrants) and the U.S. Justice Department, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1898 that children born in America to foreigners were U.S. citizens.

- Technology: Taiwanese American Jerry Yang co-founded the web portal Yahoo! and Taiwanese American Steven Chen co-founded the video-sharing platform YouTube.

- Architecture: Chinese American I.M. Pei designed the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Pyramid at the Louvre in Paris. Japanese American Minoru Yamasaki designed the original World Trade Center.

- Fashion: Chinese American fashion designer Vera Wang is best known for her bridal wear, and Thailand-born designer Phillip Lim and his partner, Wen Zhou, grew their fledgling start-up to a successful international fashion brand.

Reflections from One of Our Own

FSIS’ own C. Natalie Lui Duncan, deputy assistant administrator in the Office of Management, shared her experiences as young girl raised in the Chinese American community in New York City. Below is an excerpt from her story:

“I was born in Hong Kong and relocated with my family to Melbourne, Australia, when I turned one. At the age of five, my family and I made a transpacific journey to America. … While my parents immersed me in Chinese cultural traditions, they felt that it was important to expand my horizons beyond the boundaries of Chinatown and expose me to American culture. … [They also] instilled in me the importance of living a life of purpose in service to others.” Read the rest of Duncan’s story and learn about her career in public service.

For More Information

There are many resources available regarding the contributions of Asian and Pacific Islander peoples; asianpacificheritage.gov/about/ lists websites and event calendars. View a Digital Town Hall: Asian Americans in the Time of COVID-19 on the Public Broadcasting Service’s website, which also features a five-part film series entitled Asian Americans, which examines the role that Asian Americans have played in shaping our nation’s history.
Deputy Under Secretary’s Column

It has been almost two months since I joined USDA as the Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety, and I appreciate the warm welcome I received from FSIS and USDA as a whole. Being on “the inside” after working as an advocate from the outside provides a whole new perspective on the important work done by FSIS employees. FSIS is not just a regulatory agency — we are a public health regulatory agency. For me, that means a goal of every policy we pursue, every pilot we propose, every regulation we finalize and every waiver we grant must be to improve public health.

A lawyer and consumer advocate, I first stepped into the food safety arena in the aftermath of the 1993 Jack in the Box outbreak involving a deadly pathogen, E. coli O157:H7. As a result of that outbreak, industry put new practices in place and government implemented new policies, which together have led to a substantial decrease in human illness linked to E. coli O157:H7 in products regulated by USDA. This is a public health success story.

Today, Salmonella is a leading cause of foodborne illness and we have work to do to bring down Salmonella infections, especially Salmonella in poultry. Our goal must not be just to reduce product contamination, but to do it in a way that we believe will reduce foodborne illness, and then to monitor it to see if it is working.

Everyone has a role in making sure that food is safe — from the producers who raise the animals, to the companies that slaughter and process them, to the FSIS inspectors who ensure safety, to the consumers who ultimately handle and cook these products. But I strongly believe that slaughter and processing operations must do everything they possibly can to reduce pathogens on meat and poultry products. Thank you for the work that you do to carry out our mission and for being part of these success stories.

Administrator’s Column

The small and very small establishments that we regulate play an important role in our national food supply. Over 90 percent of establishments we regulate are designated as “small” or “very small.” During the FSIS Employee Town Hall on March 24, Secretary Vilsack highlighted several ways that Congress and the new Administration are supporting these establishments.

The American Rescue Plan includes $100 million to reduce the cost of overtime fees small and very small establishments pay for FSIS inspection through 2030. This will lower their financial burden and aid in economic recovery from the pandemic. In addition, the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act provides $60 million to USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service to make facility upgrade and planning grants available for establishments to make improvements necessary to obtain a federal Grant of Inspection or to become a Cooperative Interstate Shipment establishment.

Outreach and communication with small and very small establishments continues to be a priority for the Agency. Our enforcement, investigations and analysis officers spend up to 25 percent of their time supporting them. The Small Plant Help Desk and askFSIS have reduced response times. We host small plant roundtables virtually. We continue to hold monthly industry town halls so any establishment, of any size, can speak directly with leadership.

As the new Administration has emphasized, we must create a more level playing field for small and medium producers and a more balanced, equitable economy for everyone working in food and agriculture. I am proud of the work you do to support small and very small establishments, and I encourage you to continue to share information and opportunities with them. I also welcome feedback you have for how we can further support these businesses by sending your ideas to FSISFeedback@usda.gov.
Town Hall Roundup

FSIS employee Town Hall Meetings are live phone conferences hosted by Agency leadership. Watch your email for meeting invitations and the Wednesday Newsline for information about future meetings. Recordings for each month are available on InsideFSIS, the Agency intranet site (requires eAuthentication). Announcements will be in the Wednesday Newsline when recordings are posted. In each issue, The Beacon also will bring you highlights of the previous month’s meeting.

At the April meetings, Agency leadership also took questions live, which will continue each month. The live Q&A portion of the call is not recorded. Please also continue to send your questions and suggestions to the FSIS Feedback mailbox.

April 28, 2021

FSIS Administrator Paul Kiecker introduced listeners to Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Sandra Eskin. Kiecker discussed the importance of career development, and Assistant Administrator for the Office of Employee Experience and Development Dr. Soumaya Tohamy explained the growth of FSIS employees availing themselves of training development opportunities. She also talked about more opportunities coming for employees.

Deputy Administrator Terri Nintemann discussed the Secretary’s Statement on Civil Rights and the observance of May as Asian American and Pacific Islander Month. (Read more on page 9.) She also discussed reasonable accommodation and civil rights trainings and the Fiscal Year 2022 budget. She closed by recognizing the first week of May as Public Service Recognition Week, thanking employees for the dedication. (Read more on page 1.)

Highlights from FSIS Leadership

Workplace Safety Plan Update. FSIS posted on its employees’ COVID-19 Pandemic Resources webpage an FSIS-specific appendix to the Department’s USDA COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan. Earlier this year, the Department posted its plan on USDA’s Coronavirus Disease page. It highlights how we can protect the health and safety of our own employees, onsite contractors and those who visit federal buildings. The FSIS Appendix describes FSIS-specific requirements for protective equipment, screening and testing, quarantine, vaccination status and more. One change from previous requirements is related to testing and quarantine for travel. This applies to employees who take TDY travel outside their state of residence. They should follow CDC guidance related to COVID-19 testing, which has changed. The appendix addresses circumstances where travel is necessary but there may not be sufficient time for testing. The FSIS Appendix includes the link to the most current CDC guidance. Employees are encouraged to check that website for updates because guidance can change over time.

American Rescue Plan Act and FSIS-Regulated Establishments. Congress provided $100 million to reduce the cost of overtime and holiday inspection fees for small and very small establishments. The purpose is to lower the financial burden for these plants and aid in economic recovery related to the pandemic. FSIS intends to publish a Federal Register Notice that will explain how the Agency will implement the American Rescue Plan’s cost-saving provision. These reduced fees would apply to official establishments producing meat (including Siluriformes), poultry and egg products. Hear more on the recording of the April town hall meeting.

Annual Leave Restoration. Employees who had an annual leave balance exceeding the 240-hour ceiling at the end of 2020, were eligible for restoration under two categories: (1) from the OPM emergency leave restoration provisions, currently the COVID pandemic or (2) from the National Defense Authorization Act, which allowed federal employees to carry over up to 300 hours of annual leave, but only for 2021. Both leave restoration processes are complete, and employees should see their annual leave balances adjusted accordingly in May.

FSIS Food for Thought

After many years, this is the final issue of The Beacon. Beginning in June, The Beacon and the Wednesday Newsline are teaming up to bring you a new weekly eNewsletter – Food for Thought. You’ll still see the content you love and expect from those publications, including retirements, messages from leadership, Snapshots, Faces of Food Safety and announcements – but now, every week right in your inbox without opening an attachment. Keep sending your submissions to Beacon@usda.gov, but watch for more information in the Newsline and the employee town hall over the next few weeks.
Archie Magoulas: A Voice for Food Safety

By Suzanne Hensell, OPACE

For over 17 years, Argyris (Archie) Magoulas has served as a technical information specialist on the Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education’s Food Safety Education Staff (FSES). In this role, he provides food safety recommendations, educational services and resources to consumers through the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline (via phone, chat and e-mail) and AskUSDA. Magoulas stays up-to-date on developments in food, nutrition, labeling and other issues to effectively address questions on those subjects, not just from consumers, but news media and other stakeholders. To help ensure all team members provide consistent responses on the Hotline, Magoulas researches food safety topics and creates abstracts, written explanations and outlines, as well as articles for the Agency’s knowledge database, AskUSDA. Several FSIS program areas also use the database, which allows for key word searches and consistent responses to questions.

After earning his Food Science and Technology degree at the University of Maryland’s School of Agriculture in 1979, Magoulas sought a job in the food industry. He worked many years as a Quality Assurance/Quality Control (QA/QC) professional, primarily working with non-meat/poultry foods. As a laboratory control technician, he performed QA/QC checks at establishments that made salad dressings and mayonnaise. Later, at an apple processing plant, he set up the plant’s entire lab and served as QA lab manager. Magoulas also held a QA/QC position with an establishment that processed deli sausage, jerky products, pickled pork and pickled eggs, where he worked alongside a USDA inspector. The transition from non-meat to meat commodities was easy for Magoulas, as the background needed for QA/QC includes the study of all commodities, including meat and poultry.

In his early days with the Agency, senior food safety specialists with the Hotline were Magoulas’ mentors. Today, as a senior specialist, he shares his experience and knowledge with other specialists. He says he and his peers mentor each other, as they all have something important to share with the rest of the FSES team.

Consumer and Customer Focus

As the primary point of contact for the FSES publications program, Magoulas coordinates the distribution of all FSES publications, such as Cooking for Groups: A Volunteer’s Guide to Food Safety and the Kitchen Companion: Your Safe Food Handbook. This public outreach to educators, health care professionals, agricultural fairs, cooperative extension programs and others, provides publications and other materials to further emphasize the Agency’s food safety messages to consumers.

Providing local and national media interviews for significant food safety events – July Fourth, Back to School, Thanksgiving, Christmas and Super Bowl – are also part of Magoulas’ responsibilities. He likes to include “fun facts” in his food safety interviews, such as the number of chicken wings consumed on Super Bowl Sunday (more than 1.4 billion).

Some of the most common questions Magoulas responds to on the Hotline include food product dating (the meaning of “sell by” and “best by” dates); how long foods are considered safe; how best to save leftovers; and freezing food and its effect on food safety. Around the holidays, most calls to the Hotline have to do with preparing a turkey – callers seek advice regarding cooking times, stuffing, getting the temperature of the turkey and other foods right so they are safe to eat, and how to use a thermometer. As the volume of contacts received through the Hotline is highest on Thanksgiving, he and other members of the team take turns every other year working the holiday’s special Hotline hours, 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., Eastern time. One of the most interesting Hotline calls was from a caller who was traveling with a frozen turkey; she called from the airport to find out if the turkey would be safe to eat for Thanksgiving. The caller was advised that, if not kept properly frozen, the turkey would become dangerous to keep and cook and should be discarded.

Magoulas enjoys working with other program areas in FSIS — and even other federal partners — to ensure callers get the answers they need. For example, a technical question (such as one related to Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point requirements) would be forwarded to the FSIS Small Plant Help Desk or AskFSIS. Other calls may be referred to another federal agency such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for a question regarding raw milk.

Empowered to be Successful

Magoulas finds his job rewarding, knowing he and his team are preventing foodborne illnesses and educating the public about food safety. He says, “FSIS empowers me to be successful
Technical Information Specialist, Archie Magoulas, celebrated the holidays with wife, Rebecca and sons, Kosta (far left) and Yanni. Photo courtesy of Archie Magoulas, OPACE.

FSIS Appendix to USDA COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan Available

The Department issued the USDA COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan earlier this year. The Agency has developed an FSIS Appendix to the plan, now available on the FSIS website. The Appendix describes FSIS-specific requirements for protective equipment, screening and testing, quarantine, vaccination testing, travel and more. The majority of the Appendix is consistent with previous policies; however, there is one notable change related to testing and quarantine requirements for travel, which follow guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Review the Appendix to become more familiar with these requirements. Please reach out to your supervisor if you have any questions related to information provided in the Appendix.

...Continued from page 5

in protecting public health through a combination of training, resources and tools.” He enjoys taking classes offered in AgLearn, as well as courses offered by other organizations on such topics as how to deal with difficult callers and food science related classes.

“We’ve been fortunate to have Archie on the Meat and Poultry Hotline for 17 years,” said Acting FSES Director Roxanne Smith. “Archie believes in our public health mission and is customer focused, which shows as he helps consumers every day in answering their questions on food safety.” FSES estimates that over his 17 years, Magoulas has responded to over 150,000 inquiries.

Personal Notes

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Magoulas’ family later moved to Greece, where his father owned and operated a restaurant. When he was 14, his father sought opportunity in the United States, and brought his family to Annapolis, Maryland.

Magoulas and his wife, Yihua (Rebecca), have two sons, Kosta and Yanni. When he’s not working the phones for the Meat and Poultry Hotline, Magoulas enjoys being outdoors hiking, biking and swimming. While it may be several years away, Magoulas anticipates he will continue to help others in his retirement by volunteering at a local food bank or his county’s agricultural extension (or “co-op”), perhaps answering callers’ questions on the co-op’s hotline.

Getting your COVID-19 Vaccine? Show us your shot!

The COVID-19 vaccination is an important tool to help us end the COVID-19 pandemic. When you go to get your COVID-19 vaccine, ask if you can snap a photo right before, during or after your COVID-19 vaccine and show us your shot! High quality photos should be sent as .jpg files to Beacon@usda.gov along with your name, location and caption. We’re all excited to see these critical vaccines reaching FSIS employees.
Heat, Meat and Food Safety

By Felicia Thompson, OPACE

The summer season unofficially begins the last week of May, when the dampness of spring becomes a distant memory and the smell of grilled meat fills the air. While preparing your feast of FSIS-regulated products over fiery embers, remember to be food safe this summer and throughout the year.

FSIS provides guidance on Grilling Food Safely that can be followed any time, but especially when cooking on the “barbee.” The webpage offers cleaning, separating, cooking and chilling tips on a host of topics.

• Keep Everything Clean
• Separate Raw and Cooked Foods
• Cook Thoroughly
• Safe Smoking
• Pit Roasting
• Keep Cold Food Cold
• Keep Hot Food Hot
• Leftovers & Reheating

As you heat up your grill, be sure to make food safety a part of your daily routine and help prevent foodborne illness.

Take a Hike and Be Safe

By Leo O’Drudy, OPACE

Springtime will see more people outside hiking wooded trails as it is a great way to get exercise and fresh air while potentially improving mental health. After a yearlong sequestration due to COVID-19, the serenity of forests just might be what the body and mind need to rejuvenate. Just make sure to plan ahead, know your limits and experience level, avoid unnecessary risks and bring essentials, like a face mask, hand sanitizer or wipes, water and food that can be kept safe.

Safety Tips

Even when the weather is cool, dehydration or heat illness can occur. One of the most important things hikers should have with them is clean water or access to water from treated municipal supplies. Ingesting (or swimming in) untreated water – typically found in lakes, rivers or ponds – can lead to giardiasis, a parasitic infection that can cause diarrhea, vomiting, loss of appetite, pain and fatigue. If you must drink untreated water, first boil it for one full minute. FSIS also recommends everyone, including hikers, to wash their hands frequently but especially before and after preparing and eating food.

Food is also important to have because it keeps the body energized, and hikers should pay close attention to what food items they pack. FSIS warns against storing food outside even when there is snow or ice present, not only because the temperature can change unpredictably, but perishable food can become unsafe to consume as it warms up. Food can also attract bears and other animals, like rodents, which can cause personal harm or illness if food becomes contaminated.

The Department of the Interior’s National Park Service (NPS) recommends hikers pack food that is compact, compressible, high in calories and lacks strong odors, such as rice, tortillas, jerky, pastas, nuts, dried fruits, peanut butter and protein bars. Most of these foods have the additional benefit of not needing to be kept cold. In contrast, common packed-lunch favorites like boiled eggs or ham/turkey sandwiches may be risky on the trail, since they must be kept below 40 °F and coolers are often too heavy for hiking, and even insulated lunch bags may be intended for milder indoor conditions rather than being jostled for hours inside a warm backpack next to a warm body in the warm outdoors.

NPS has more information about hiking safely, including tips for beginners, equipment to bring and more. The Forest Service, FSIS’ sister agency in USDA, offers a wealth of information for hiking and other activities in its Know Before You Go section. Have fun and stay safe!