



United States Department of Agriculture

Food Safety and
Inspection Service

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Thomas Gremillion
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May 31, 2022

Dear Mr. Gremillion:

The Food Safety and Inspection Service has completed its review of the petition you submitted on behalf of the Safe Food Coalition (SFC) dated May 31, 2016, and assigned petition #16-04. The petition requests that FSIS initiate rulemaking to revise the regulations that prescribe mandatory safe handling instruction (SHI) labeling for raw and partially cooked meat and poultry products.¹ The petition specifically requests that FSIS update the regulations to require that the SHI label: 1) display information about thermometer use and end-point cooking temperatures; 2) include the “Check Your Steps” logo that identifies the four safe handling practices on the www.foodsafety.gov website—clean, cook, separate, and chill—instead of the current required graphic; 3) be positioned in a manner to ensure the label’s readability; and 4) include a web address for additional information on safe cooking recommendations.

As discussed below, the results of recently published consumer research found that three experimental SHI labels that contained many of the features requested in your petition did not perform better than the current SHI label regarding visual attention and label adherence for all four safe handling instructions. The research also found that consumers tend to focus more on the manufacturer’s cooking instructions (MCI) than the SHI. Based on these results, FSIS has concluded that initiating rulemaking to revise the SHI labeling regulations as requested in your petition would not be an effective use of Agency resources because the requested revisions would likely have a limited impact on influencing consumer’s food handling behavior. Therefore, as discussed below, we have decided to deny your petition without prejudice.

As noted in your petition, in January 2014, after considering input from academia, industry, and consumer stakeholders, the National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection (NACMPI) Subcommittee on Food Handling Labels recommended that FSIS pursue changes in the existing SHI label and conduct

¹ The petition also requests that FSIS add requirements for a SHI label for all raw or partially cooked *Siluriformes* fish products. However, the labeling regulations for fish of the order Siluriformes have always required that the Siluriformes fish and fish product labeling bear safe handling labeling (9 CFR 541.7(a)).

consumer research to determine the effectiveness of any revisions to the SHI label. Six consumer focus groups that FSIS conducted in 2015 revealed that consumers would find certain revisions to the SHI label, such as recommendation to use a food thermometer and providing endpoint temperatures, useful. Based on these results, FSIS determined that additional research using more rigorous, quantitative approaches with a larger sample of consumers was needed to help inform potential revisions to the current SHI label and assess whether a label revision would improve consumer food safety behaviors.²

In July 2018, FSIS announced that it had contracted with RTI International and its subcontractor North Carolina State University (NCSU) to conduct consumer behavior research to assess whether revisions are needed to the SHI label required on all raw and partially cooked products and to evaluate the ability of consumers to properly discern between not ready-to-eat (NRTE) and (ready-to-eat) RTE products.³ RTI submitted its final report on the consumer research results on September 23, 2020. A brief summary of the results related to the SHI label are discussed below. The full research report is published on the FSIS website at: <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/food-safety-stats/consumer-research>.

The first phase of the research consisted of a web-based experiment that was conducted with a sample of U.S. consumers to select three variants of a revised SHI label that best attract participants' attention. The three revised SHI labels that were selected contained many of the features requested in your petition, such as information about thermometer use and end-point cooking temperatures, updated safe handling messages and graphics, and a web address for additional information on safe cooking recommendations. The second phase of the research consisted of a behavior change study to evaluate the effectiveness of the three revised SHI labels compared with the current SHI label on the study participants' adherence to recommended safe handling instructions. The behavior change study included an observational meal preparation experiment, an eye tracking study, and post-survey interviews with study participants.

The results of the behavior change study showed that the three revised labels, which, as noted above, contained many of the features requested in your petition, did not perform better than the current SHI label regarding visual attention and label adherence for all four safe handling instructions. While one revised label was more effective at encouraging proper handwashing, it did not influence other behaviors. The study also found that participants tended to spend more time looking at the manufacturer's cooking instructions (MCI) than the SHI label, and they tended to look at the MCI before they looked at the SHI.

² Cates, S. C., Kosa, K., & Muth, M. K. (2016, March). Professional services to support requirements gathering sessions for Safe Food Handling Instructions: Focus group research final report. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International.

³ Notice of Request for a New Information Collection: (Consumer Research on the Safe Handling Instruction Label for Raw and Partially Cooked Meat and Poultry Products and Labeling Statements for Ready-to-Eat and Not Ready-to-Eat Products) (83 FR 34101, July 19, 2018). <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/policy/federal-register-rulemaking/federal-register-notices/request-new-information-collection-0>

Mr. Gremillion
Page 3

While we do not intend to initiate rulemaking to amend the SHI at this time, FSIS will continue to explore new strategies for communicating safe food handling practices to consumers. The current SHI labeling regulations will remain in place while we consider research options and other strategies.

For the reasons discussed above, we are denying your petition. Because our denial is without prejudice, the SFC is not precluded from submitting a revised petition that contains additional information to support the requested actions. In accordance with our petition regulations, we have posted your petition on the FSIS website (9 CFR 392.6). We intend to post this response as well.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rachel A. Edelstein". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R".

Rachel Edelstein
Assistant Administrator
Office of Policy and Program Development