

Food Safety and
Inspection Service

Volume Number
27 8

Inside This Issue

- 2 Spotlight: OFO's Executive Associates
- 3 Under Secretary's Column
- 3 Administrator's Column
- 4 COVID-19 Information
- 5 Recent Retirees
- 6 Snapshots
- 8 Policy Updates
- 9 OED Training Corner
- 9 Pathogen Profile: *E. coli*
- 10 Faces of Food Safety
- 11 Website Modernization Efforts
- 12 Recent Recalls
- 12 FSIS Townhall Meetings
- 12 Recent Events and Presentations

The Beacon

PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH FOOD SAFETY

Employees should continue to participate in all-employee town hall calls and look for timely information from their supervisors and the Wednesday Newline.

Item Number	Item Names	Estimated Date Available
FSIS-98	Cooling Hat Liner	Ready for Order
FSIS-99	Evaporative Cooling Hard Hat Pad	Ready for Order
FSIS-100	Evaporative Cooling Bandana	September 8, 2020
FSIS-68	Neck Cooling Scarves (2 Pack)	Ready for Order
FSIS-69-FP	Sqwinchers, Fruit Punch Flavor (Box 50)	Ready for Order
FSIS-69-FP-SF	Sqwinchers, Sugar Free, Fruit Punch Flavor (Box 50)	Ready for Order
FSIS-69-LL	Sqwinchers, Lemon Lime Flavor (Box 50)	Ready for Order
FSIS-69-OR	Sqwinchers, Orange Flavor (Box 50)	Ready for Order
FSIS-69-OR-SF	Sqwinchers, Sugar Free, Orange Flavor (Box 50)	Ready for Order

Order Codes for Heat Stress Prevention Items

The items listed are available to order using the accompanying Item Numbers. For updates on products and their availability, go to www.fsis.usda.gov/HeatStressIllnessPreventionItems. An eAuthentication account is not required.

New USDA Performance Management System and Updated Awards Program for FY21

By Kimberly Berkeley, OM
Phone: (202) 690-0428

USDA has established a new two-tier performance system for all USDA agencies, effective October 1, 2020, the start of the fiscal year (FY) 2021 rating cycle. The change also introduces an updated accomplishments-based awards program, also effective October 1, 2020, focused on employee contributions to USDA's mission rather than end-of-the-year ratings. These changes come from the recently revised [Departmental Regulation 4040-430, Employee Performance and Awards](http://www.ocio.usda.gov/document/departmental-regulation-4040-430) (www.ocio.usda.gov/document/departmental-regulation-4040-430).

Employees will be given training on the new performance management system and awards program and will need to complete it by September 30, 2020. Training is available as a webinar, "OHRM Performance and Awards Policy," or paper-based for those without online access, "New USDA Performance and Awards Policies – Paper-Based."

Below are some pieces of key information regarding the new system.

Highlights of the New Performance System

- Will be a two-tier rating system allowing for only summary ratings of "Fully Successful" for "Unacceptable."
- All performance elements will be critical, and each element will be rated as "Fully Successful" or "Does Not Meet Fully Successful."
- A rating narrative will be required in two circumstances: (1) when an element is rated "Does Not Meet Fully Successful" or (2) when an element is rated Fully Successful, even though, due to circumstances outside of the employee's control, all the goals in that element

Continued on page 4...

Share Your FSIS Stories and Snapshots!

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 250 words.

The Beacon 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.



The Beacon

PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH FOOD SAFETY

The Beacon Mission Statement

The Beacon newsletter is prepared by the Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education to provide relevant mission critical information to all FSIS employees.

The Beacon provides employees information about the Agency’s proposed regulations, policies and programs; training opportunities; and important employee welfare initiatives to connect employees to the mission and build a cohesive community.

The Beacon enables employees to stay up-to-date with the latest events and see the Agency’s mission executed in action.

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Deadline for submissions is the first day of the previous month.

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Oct. issue – due Sep. 1 | Nov. issue – due Oct. 1 |
| Dec. issue – due Nov. 1 | Jan. issue – due Dec. 1 |

Articles will be considered for publication in the order in which they are received. If your article is time sensitive, please indicate that in the subject line of your submission email. Due to the number of submissions received each month and the limited amount of space, we unfortunately cannot guarantee that your submission will be used.

The FSIS Management Council

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SPOTLIGHT

OFO’s Executive Associates

Felicia Thompson, OPACE

Phone: (202) 603-2150

FSIS owes its ability to run like a well-oiled machine to its diverse workforce. Each employee brings his or her own set of skills to the table, which enables the Agency to fulfill its mission— ensuring meat, poultry and egg products remain safe, wholesome and properly labeled.

Approximately 8,600 employees, including about 7,500 in-plant personnel and others in the Office of Field Operations (OFO), work collectively to conduct a broad range of food safety activities to achieve FSIS’ overall vision — ensuring everyone’s food is safe. This dedicated team is considered the “boots on the ground” because they are the ones that make sure that more than 6,000 geographically dispersed establishments, divided into 10 districts, are slaughtering livestock humanely and are producing safe food.

Understandably, managing a team of this size requires coordination, planning and two- (or more) way communication. Playing a key role in keeping those lines of communication open are OFO’s Executive Associates for Regulatory Operations (EARO).

Geraldine “Gerri” French, Paul Wolseley, Robert Bane and Michael Watts are the Agency’s EAROs or liaisons that ensure FSIS’ front-line employees and the Agency’s many stakeholders are on the same page and aware of new or existing policies and high-level decisions that enable the Agency to modernize. This is no small task as each of these entities represents a very important spoke on the wheel that requires FSIS’ attention.

This month, we introduce Gerri French and Paul Wolseley. Readers will learn how their skills and experiences contribute to their current roles as EAROs and how their efforts impact the Agency’s mission and vision. In September’s issue, we will introduce Robert Bane and Michael Watts.

Meet Geraldine “Gerri” French

Gerri French was appointed as EARO in May 2020 after serving in an acting capacity. In this role, French is responsible for supporting the OFO district offices located in Springdale, Jackson and Philadelphia, which includes approximately 2,100 employees in 15 states.

The position requires her to use her knowledge of the Agency’s various program areas — and her skills at leading teams — in a more direct role supporting inspection operations. French appreciated this opportunity to make a difference by contributing to the Agency’s success in a different capacity.

Much of French’s understanding of how many parts of FSIS work comes from personal experience, which has also honed her communication and management abilities. In the two decades that French has been with

Continued on page 8...

Under Secretary's Column

The COVID-19 public health crisis has highlighted the importance of the work that FSIS does — ensuring the safety of the food supply. I cannot express enough my gratitude and appreciation for the dedicated staff we have across the country. This month, I want to specifically call out and thank the FSIS laboratory personnel in the Office of Public Health Science (OPHS). All three FSIS laboratories — Athens, Georgia; Albany, California; and St. Louis, Missouri — remain operational during the COVID-19 pandemic to test food safety samples and identify and characterize bacteria in food samples.



Dr. Mindy Brashears

Just as our in-plant personnel continue to rise to meet the challenges of COVID-19, our laboratory personnel have pulled together as a team to demonstrate their resourcefulness and resilience. Employees relocated offices to conference rooms, physically spaced out analytic equipment, implemented flexible work schedules and altered workflows — all to maintain social distancing. In the early days of the pandemic, when supplies and resources were still scarce, laboratory staff from all locations worked together to find and buy safety supplies, such as hand sanitizer, sanitizing wipes, gloves and face shields. Staff and their family members also stepped up to sew cloth face coverings for their coworkers.

It is critical that the laboratories can continue to function, even if a large proportion of staff are affected by illness or quarantine. About 30 laboratory staff members volunteered to train 34 volunteers in methods to support lab work if needed. The volunteers are from the Office of Policy and Program Development; from OPHS' Laboratory Quality Assurance Staff, Food Emergency Response Network Staff, and the Executive Associate for Laboratory Services Staff; as well as technicians from the Agricultural Research Service.

Our laboratory personnel continue to demonstrate amazing dedication to their vital role of supporting in-plant personnel and producing essential test results. I'm so proud of the flexibility of our employees, as well as a willingness to find new ways to accomplish our mission and support one another as one FSIS team.

Administrator's Column

There is no doubt that 2020 has challenged us in ways we could not have anticipated. While so many aspects of our lives may seem out of our control, we always have the power to choose how we respond to these obstacles — we can still control our attitude and the actions that we take.



Paul Kiecker

I am continually impressed by the ways that FSIS employees respond to unexpected challenges.

Recently, the organizers of the 2020 Feds Feed Families (FFF) campaign were asked to modify the campaign to an entirely virtual platform in response to COVID-19. The FFF volunteers showed remarkable ingenuity and creativity in developing an online hub for campaign activity and new ways to connect and engage employees with their communities. In the same way, FSIS employees adapted to this new format and found ways to participate and contribute. While we might have missed seeing collection boxes full of cans and boxes of food or attending a can-raising event, we could watch the donations climb on the FFF Hub Results Dashboard (fedsfeedfamilies.ocio.usda.gov/). At the conclusion of the formal campaign on July 31, FSIS employees had donated 123,880 pounds of food, 2nd among USDA agencies. The generosity and enthusiasm of our staff for this important annual campaign continued to shine through.

Although the push for the Feds Feed Families campaign occurs every summer, the campaign never really ends. The FFF hub will remain active throughout the year, so employees can continue to find resources and information on how to continue helping families in need. I hope the summer campaign has helped us remain connected with our communities and find ways we can contribute every day. In the same way, I hope that with the traits that we are exhibiting during COVID-19 — flexibility, resilience and positive thinking — will become characteristics we continue to display in our personal and professional lives.

As we head into the end of summer, I realize that for many of us, taking a vacation may look a little different this year. I

Continued on page 5...

may not have been met.

- Quarterly Progress Reviews will be identified as “Quarterly Conversations” to underscore the objective of ensuring the communication between the Rating Official and employee is frequent and ongoing.
- Demonstration Opportunities (formerly referred to as Performance Improvement Plans) can end prior to 30 days if the employee fails the Demonstration Opportunity before the full performance period ends.
- Within Grade Increases (WGI) may not be granted automatically, for example — the employee’s rating of record is not Fully Successful at the time of WGI eligibility).

Highlights of the Awards Policy Changes

- Due to the two-tier performance appraisal system, USDA will no longer use end-of-year rating-based awards. *Note that rating-based awards will still be permitted for FY20 ratings, because they will be based on the FY20 five-tier summary rating system.*
- Non-rating-based awards will be “Achievement Awards,” which will include more than one type of award. Spot Awards will no longer be in the program. Employees will be eligible for monetary and/or time-off Achievement Awards

(i.e., non-rating-based) to recognize specific or individual accomplishments that exceed normal job requirements.

- To be eligible for monetary or time-off awards (TOA), the employee will need a rating of record at that time of Fully Successful. Additionally, an employee placed on leave restriction within the 52 weeks prior to the award effective date will not be eligible for a TOA.
- Instead of TOAs expiring after 26 pay periods, employees will be able to carry over 80 hours of TOAs at the end of each calendar year. Any balance over 80 hours will be forfeited.
- If an employee moves to another USDA agency, full TOA amounts will be allowed to transfer. Agencies will be permitted to honor up to 40 hours of existing TOAs for employees transferring to USDA from other federal departments.
- The waiting period between Quality Step Increases (QSI) will be increased from 52 weeks to 104 weeks. A QSI will require 18 months of sustained performance excellence in the same grade and type of position, which requires that the employee be at the full performance level (highest grade of a career ladder) of their position.

If you have any questions, please email PerformanceManagement@usda.gov.

COVID-19 Information for You

By Laura Reiser, OPACE
Phone: (202) 720-7894

Each month, *The Beacon* continues to bring you questions and answers from the FSISFeedback@usda.gov email and reminders and updates the COVID-19 related issues. You will also continue to see information in the *Wednesday Newsline*, email user notices and the all-employee town hall meetings. Beginning in August, the **town hall meetings will be held monthly**, on the fourth Wednesday of each month. Three times will still be offered on Town Hall day: 9 a.m., 3 p.m. and 9 p.m. Eastern Time. The next meeting is September 23. Meetings will include any topic, not just pandemic-related announcements or concerns. Though the FSIS Feedback email box is receiving fewer emails, employees are encouraged to submit questions, concerns or suggestions for any work-related topic.

Return to Work Sites

FSIS in-plant personnel (IPP) are unique because they work in **regulated establishments** — not federally controlled and operated buildings. On May 22, the Agency provided return-to-work guidance for field employees who work in regulated establishments and had self-certified as being at higher risk for severe COVID-19 infection. If an employee believes that special

protective equipment is needed to return to work or that other precautions should be in place before they return, they should use the reasonable accommodation process to make a request.

The USDA Reopening Playbook is for reopening **USDA facilities** closed due to COVID-19. It includes how agencies should bring employees back to work at those sites. For FSIS, this is primarily employees in offices at USDA-owned or -leased facilities. Local pandemic coordinators will lead in determining the appropriate phase for each FSIS facility. If employees believe they need special protective equipment to return to work or that telework should continue, they should talk with their supervisor and consider using the reasonable accommodation process.

More information about the Agency’s **reasonable accommodation** program and access to forms is at ohrportal.fsis.usda.gov/services/reasonable-accommodation-program/ (an eAuthentication account is required). You can also request information and request and submit forms by emailing ReasonableAccommodations@usda.gov.

Continued on page 5...

Cristina Picazo's Hard Work Pays Off

By Suzanne Hensell, OPACE

Phone: (202) 690-3626

Maria Cristina Picazo is on the move — to Wichita, Kansas, to be exact. A consumer safety inspector (CSI) at an establishment in Holcomb, Kansas, Picazo applied for and was promoted to enforcement, investigations and analysis officer (EIAO) in March 2020. After training, she will make the move to begin her new position in Wichita. This has been a noteworthy year for Picazo — in addition to her promotion, she earned an associate degree in animal science, as well as food safety and food production certificates at Garden City Community College (GCCC) in Garden City, Kansas. Through FSIS' Continuing Education Program (CEP), the Agency reimbursed her for courses related to food safety, food science and animal science. While working full time throughout her coursework, she made the GCCC President's Honor Roll for achieving a grade point average of 4.0.

Her A-shift supervisor, Dr. Camilo Potes, said, "I have known Ms. Cristina Picazo for almost three years during which time she worked with me as a CSI, and I have been consistently impressed with her attitude and productivity. Cristina is both very bright and quite motivated. She is also a quick learner and has shown the ability to digest large volumes of information and to articulate information and ideas. I am confident that she will devote herself with a high degree of diligence and success to her new role as an EIAO."

Picazo's Career Track

Picazo began her FSIS career as a food inspector in 2003. She earned her promotion to CSI in 2007, where she conducts inspection verification activities of beef products to ensure establishments comply with the Federal Meat Inspection Act. These verification activities consist of performing direct observations and records review of the establishment's implementation of their written hazard analysis and critical control point program, standard operating procedures, sanitation performance standards and all other food safety programs. She also conducts humane handling, ante-mortem and post-mortem inspections, and performs export verification and sampling of products. Said Picazo, "I get a tremendous amount of fulfillment and satisfaction knowing that every day I protect the health of consumers, the welfare of animals and the nation's food supply chain."

Picazo's B-shift supervisor, Dr. Kevin J. Lavelle, describes her as "an extremely hard worker. She is excellent in the performance of her responsibilities and is very knowledgeable of the regulations and directives. Cristina applies this knowledge proficiently in the presence of deficiencies she finds on her patrols of the establishment. She possesses the ability to interact with the establishment management and personnel professionally and



Maria Cristina Picazo, consumer safety inspector in Holcomb, Kansas. Photo courtesy of Maria Cristina Picazo.

communicate her concerns to the veterinary medical officer promptly, succinctly and accurately. Most importantly, Cristina is a team player and always does her best to contribute to the fulfillment of the Agency's mission."

Picazo believes FSIS fosters success: "FSIS empowers me to be successful through many training opportunities where I have gained extensive knowledge to successfully execute my duties. I currently participate in FSIS mentoring programs where I contribute as both mentor and mentee." Her mentor encouraged her to pursue the EIAO position. She also mentors food inspectors who are interested in a CSI position; to date, seven of her mentees have applied for and earned promotions to CSIs.

Prior to working at FSIS, Picazo was a quality assurance supervisor for a large beef plant. The position helped her understand food safety concepts and the importance of ensuring that food products are produced in a wholesome manner. A CSI at the plant discussed FSIS opportunities with her. She decided to apply for a job with the Agency because she had always been interested in food safety and wanted to be part of the FSIS team. More recently, a mentor in the Springdale District mentoring program helped Picazo understand the role and duties of an EIAO, which ultimately led to her new role with the Agency. Picazo advises anyone with a passion for food safety to consider a career with FSIS, and added, "I would advise them to prepare themselves for a wonderful career."

Paying it Forward

Picazo enjoys running, listening to music and volunteering her time. An avid advocate of the Continuing Education Program, she has written articles about the program for the district newsletter. As a member of the Springdale District Equal Employment Opportunity Advisory Committee, she has volunteered to make presentations about CEP to fellow FSIS employees. She has also assisted the Springdale District with several recruiting events. In addition to mentoring food inspectors, she has tutored others continuing their education and assisted with several resume

Continued on page 11...

writing classes for FSIS inspectors in the southwestern Kansas area.

Picazo is married with five children: Cristina, Leopoldo, Priscila, and twins Brianna and Britney. Also employed by FSIS for over twelve years, her husband Armando Picazo is a CSI in Holcomb, Kansas. It's no surprise the couple have taught their children about food safety — how to read labels, check expiration dates on food products and measure the internal temperature of foods when cooking.

Website Modernization Efforts

By Shayla Mae Bailey, OPACE

Phone: (202) 604-0047

Historically, government websites have a reputation for giving very little thought to how the average user thinks and what they are trying to accomplish. But positive change is coming. Across the federal government, agencies and departments are now being asked to modernize their digital tools and websites with an emphasis on understanding and meeting user needs. The strategies and steps for this modernization are outlined in the United States Web Design System (USWDS).

The USWDS focuses on providing standard code for federal websites, enabling them to implement modern practices in a stable and accessible way. This means that those with disabilities, different browsers or different devices will all be able use these federal websites and have comparable experiences across the board. The new FSIS website will be in line with broader federal efforts to modernize digital services.

Shift to User-Focused Design

The current FSIS website reflects more of an “organizational chart” approach to some high-value areas of our information and a “filing cabinet approach” to other areas. It does not fully consider the priorities of our users or the audiences it serves. The new site will put users’ needs first, while taking into consideration the Agency’s goals and priorities for each stakeholder group.

Employ Modern Design and Strategy

The new FSIS site will use a combination of information prioritization, color and typography to maximize the user’s ability to find information quickly and reliably across the site. The current site also does not follow the USWDS and fails on some key aspects of usability and accessibility. The new site will follow USWDS 1.0 fully and 2.0 whenever possible, as well as following the USDA Digital Strategy Playbook.

...Continued from page 9

been needle-tenderized should be cooked to a temperature of at least 160 °F as measured by a food thermometer. Color is not a reliable indicator of “doneness.”

- **Avoid raw milk**, unpasteurized dairy products, and unpasteurized juices (like fresh apple cider).
- **Avoid swallowing water when swimming or playing in lakes,**

For page content, the Agency will employ a “bite-snack-meal approach,” ensuring that key information is easily discernable and digestible for all audiences. The site will also use plain language to ensure understanding across all audiences.

Move to a Cloud-Based Application

The new site will be built on Drupal 8, a powerful web content management system, which requires new system architecture and is perfectly suited for being hosted in the cloud, a centralized and secure way to store and share applications, data and IT services. The Agency has a goal to move all systems into the cloud, which is also part of a larger federal effort to modernize IT systems.

Expected to launch this fall, the new FSIS website will be a big change — for the Agency, its employees and website users. It will provide a stronger foundation for FSIS’ online services, enabling the Agency to better meet the needs of the people and organizations it serves.

To learn more about the USWDS visit: designsystem.digital.gov. To learn about USDA’s Digital Service Playbook visit: www.usda.gov/digital-strategy.



The mobile view image shows an example of the Recall Alert banner, a new component of the new FSIS website.

Pathogen Profile

ponds, streams, swimming pools and backyard “kiddie” pools.

- **Prevent cross-contamination in food preparation areas** by thoroughly washing hands, counters, cutting boards and utensils after they touch raw meat.

To learn more about how to protect yourself from *E. coli* please visit the CDC’s website at www.cdc.gov/ecoli/ecoli-prevention.