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Good morning. The National Press Club and the Center for Science in the Public Interest welcome you this morning to talk turkey about holiday food safety. This press event has become a holiday tradition of sorts, and we are glad you could join us. As we gather around our holiday tables this year, we have a lot to be thankful for. But we are definitely not thankful to USDA, which last year discontinued an important government safety program.

Today, I have a simple question for the government. Who is the turkey at USDA that stopped testing turkeys for *Salmonella*? Last year, USDA gave us incredibly useful information on how 38 plants performed when their whole turkeys were tested for *Salmonella*. We developed CSPI's Field Guide to Safe Turkeys, which helped consumers choose safer turkeys for their Thanksgiving feast.

This is a government program that works for consumers, by giving them useful and timely information that can help guide their purchases. *Salmonella* in food is responsible for 1.3 million illnesses, 15,000 hospitalizations, and over 500 deaths. Purchasing a turkey with a lower incidence of *Salmonella* means that a simple cooking or handling error is less likely to lead to food poisoning. So while consumers certainly want to avoid making errors in the kitchen, fewer illnesses would result from the inevitable mistakes that do occur.

This year, CSPI filed a Freedom of Information Act request with USDA to gather new *Salmonella* data and update our Field Guide. We were told that last year, instead of testing turkeys from 38 plants, USDA only tested the turkeys from one plant. On the Field Guide, you will notice a long column of question marks. These are the plants where USDA didn't provide new test results this year. We want to know why.

Without government testing, turkey producers have less incentive to control dangerous hazards and consumers have less information about which turkeys are the safest. Testing for



Salmonella in the chicken industry has resulted in significant reductions in this hazard on broiler chickens. And the chicken industry knows that the government can and will test them every year, especially if they have a poor record of performance. So why shouldn't the turkey industry be subject to the same testing and incentives for improvement? These are all good questions for USDA to answer.

Today CSPI sent a letter to the Secretary of Agriculture urging her to reinstate the turkey testing program, and to add *Campylobacter* testing as well. But CSPI needs your help if we are going to get useful consumer information from USDA next year. I am urging consumers to send letters to Secretary Anne Veneman at the USDA asking that she reinstate the testing of turkeys for *Salmonella* and add testing for *Campylobacter*, so the public can choose even safer turkeys next year. Sending a letter or an e-mail is simple. Just visit our website at www.cspinet.org and hit "Take Action" to get more information and a sample letter to send the Secretary.

This year, I also hoped that the turkey industry would give us some useful information about how their on-farm programs are building safer turkeys from the ground up. But following discussions with both the National Turkey Federation and even some turkey producers, we have learned that their on-farm food safety program are not quite ready-for-primetime.

So we approach this holiday season without government guidance on the safest birds to buy and no assurance from the industry that they know how to make turkeys safer. That means that it is up to consumers to protect themselves.

Consumers should treat every turkey they buy as though it is covered with *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. While cooked turkey is perfectly safe, protecting yourself from food poisoning involves many steps from the grocery store through the leftovers. Let's review a few DO's and DON'Ts, which are based on actual consumer questions to CSPI and the National Turkey Federation.

First:

DON'T attempt to thaw your turkey with a hair dryer! While it may seem a faster solution if you don't have time to use other methods, it could in fact make your turkey more contaminated on the outside but still frozen on the inside.

Instead, frozen turkeys can be thawed in the refrigerator, microwave, or in cold water. For turkeys thawed in the refrigerator, allow 24 hours for every 5 pounds of turkeys. If thawing in cold water, the water should be changed every 30 minutes and allow 30 minutes of defrosting per pound of turkey.

DON'T clean your turkey with soap. Why not? many ask. Won't a little antibacterial soap reduce the risk? First, we don't eat soap, so we don't want to use it on our food. Second, soap

can leave behind chemical residues that just aren't good for you.

Instead, use hot soapy water to clean hands, counter tops, and utensils before and after preparing the turkey. Many cases of foodborne illness result from cross-contamination in the kitchen. But on the bird itself, just rinse it inside and out with cold water and put the turkey in the pan. Then scrub the sink (and any areas that the water from the turkey reached) with hot soapy water.

DON'T attempt to cook your turkey in the dishwasher.

Instead, set oven temperature to at least 325 degrees, and cook the turkey until a meat thermometer reads 180 degrees in the thickest part of the thigh. CSPI recommends cooking stuffing outside the turkey rather than inside.

DON'T leave your feast on the counter overnight, or even for just 3 or 4 hours!

Instead, leftovers should be refrigerated within two hours after the meal. Divide the turkey into smaller pieces and store the turkey separately from leftover stuffing and gravy. We recommend that you use shallow containers so the leftovers chill quickly. Then eat, freeze or discard leftovers within 4 days of the meal.

This Thanksgiving, there is no "Best Bird" award for a company that achieved a food safety milestone, as Perdue achieved last year with it's zero *Salmonella* record. But USDA gets the "Biggest Turkey" award for discontinuing a testing program that helped consumers make safer food choices.

With help from consumers, we hope USDA will reverse course next year. In the meantime, have a happy and healthy holiday season.