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HARNESSING KNOWLEDGE TO ENSURE FOOD SAFETY

Opportunities to Improve the Nation's Food Safety Information Infrastructure

May 22, 2008 -- Food Safety Research Consortium (FSRC) researchers today released a new report that calls for sweeping changes in the way food safety information is collected and shared. The report, "*Harnessing Knowledge to Ensure Food Safety: Opportunities to Improve the Nation's Food Safety Information Infrastructure*," was written by Michael Taylor (The George Washington University) and Michael Batz (University of Florida) with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

The full report and executive summary are available electronically via the FSRC Web site at:

<http://www.thefsrc.org/FSII/>

Based on dialogue with the food safety community, the report calls for broader collaboration in the collection and sharing of information that can be used to prevent foodborne illness. Taylor and Batz identify a number of constraints on information sharing under the status quo and make the case for a new national policy and program to drive change in current practices. They detail a number of other specific recommendations aimed at improving the food safety information infrastructure.

Some key findings include:

- Information of many types and from many sources is essential to understanding food safety risks and devising preventive measures.
- System-wide improvement in how food safety information is collected and shared is essential to achieving the vision of a risk-based, preventive system in the Food and Drug Administration's Food Protection Plan and in most of the food safety bills being developed in Congress.
- The good news is that more and more information is being generated by government agencies, food companies and researchers, and new information-collection tools and information-management technologies hold great promise for food safety.
- The bad news is that there is little coordination among those collecting food safety information and too few efforts to ensure that existing information, even information collected by the government, is made readily available to those who can use it to ensure food safety.
- This lack of coordination is a consequence of the highly decentralized nature of the food safety system, built-in obstacles to data sharing in many government and private organizations and the lack of incentives and means for organizations and individuals to help meet the information needs of the system as a whole.

To address these problems, the authors recommend the following:

- Establish a national policy making it the duty of all federal agencies to better coordinate information collection, consider the information needs of the system as a whole, and maximize information sharing among all levels of government and with the private sector.
- Establish within the Department of Health and Human Services a focal point for leadership that pulls together federal, state and local officials for collaborative efforts to implement the national policy.
- Establish a forum to foster communication and collaboration among government, industry, consumers and academia to solve food safety information problems.
- Give high priority to enhancing the nation's investment in food safety epidemiology and making the collection and sharing of epidemiological data more responsive to the needs of regulators, the food industry and consumers.
- Use the Web to connect dispersed databases and electronic networks in order to make it easier for those seeking food safety information to find it.
- Do a better job of prioritizing information collection and making valuable data generated by academic researchers and private firms more readily available to others in the food safety system.
- Provide adequate public resources to implement the new food safety information policy and program.

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The Food Safety Research Consortium is a multidisciplinary collaboration among eight research institutions to improve the U.S. food safety system. The Consortium is developing new analytical approaches to make food safety decision making and programs more science- and risk-based, including tools for setting priorities, allocating resources, and devising interventions to prevent illness.