

AMY KLOBUCHAR
MINNESOTA

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ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS
JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 2, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As you complete your second week as our president, I join my fellow Americans in appreciation of the positive leadership you have already demonstrated as our nation contends with the serious challenges of the current economic crisis.

Today, however, I write to you about the nationwide salmonella outbreak that has been traced to peanut butter and peanut paste produced at a processing plant in Georgia. So far, this salmonella outbreak has been linked to eight deaths, including three residents of my state of Minnesota. It has also sickened more than 500 people in at least 43 states, including numerous children. Just this weekend, we learned that nearly 200 Minnesota school districts had received cans of peanuts from the contaminated processing plant through the National School Lunch Program.

All of this has renewed public concerns about the safety of America's food supply as well as the federal government's capacity to ensure the safety of the food we consume. I know that you share these concerns and that you have been a longtime advocate for a more effective food safety system.

The first responsibility of a government is to protect its citizens. Ensuring that Americans have safe food is a basic issue of public safety, health and consumer protection. Whenever contaminated food is allowed to reach consumers, public trust in the integrity of our food supply and the effectiveness of our government is undermined.

I am glad to hear that the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Justice have opened a criminal investigation into what may have taken place at the peanut processing plant. But more needs to be done to fulfill the federal government's responsibilities for food safety.

Therefore, I am writing to urge you to nominate a new permanent commissioner for the FDA as soon as possible and begin the process of reforming the federal government's food safety system.

The FDA needs a strong, independent leader who will put the agency's food safety responsibilities front and center. One of the new commissioner's first tasks should be to order a thorough investigation of how this salmonella contamination could have been prevented, so it does not happen again.

President Obama

Food Safety

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As you may know, the Government Accountability Office has identified oversight of food safety as one of the top 10 "high-risk" areas that should command the urgent attention and action of the federal government. In the past several years, the GAO has conducted a number of studies documenting numerous problems in the federal food safety system and recommending major reforms.

In particular, the GAO says a fragmented federal food safety system "undermines the government's ability to plan more strategically to inspect food production processes; identify and react more quickly to outbreaks of food-borne illnesses; and focus on promoting the safety and integrity of the nation's food supply."

A number of possible reforms have been proposed by the GAO and others, and I hope you will consider them. These include: greater coordination and streamlining of responsibilities among federal agencies; more resources for the FDA's food safety activities; added authority to order mandatory recalls; more effective prevention of food-borne illnesses with tougher standards and more inspections; improved food-borne illness detection and response; and better federal coordination with state and local agencies.

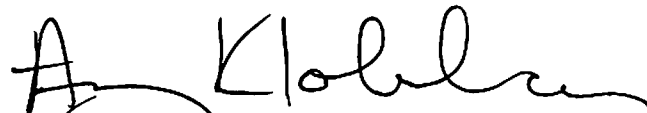
I stand ready to work with your administration and help lead the way in reforming our food safety system so American consumers can remain confident about the U.S. food supply.

Finally, I wish to bring to your attention the outstanding work of the professional staff at the Minnesota Department of Health, which was the very first agency to trace the salmonella outbreak to peanut butter originating at the processing plant in Georgia. Although the outbreak began in September 2008, there was no possibility to take action to warn consumers and recall the relevant products until the source was identified. This highlights the key role of state and local agencies, which are on the frontlines in the fight against unsafe food. The vast majority of food-borne diseases are detected and investigated at the local and state levels. I believe the work of the Minnesota Department of Health should be looked at as a model for effective federal-state coordination.

Again, I recognize you have been a longtime advocate for a more effective food safety system, and I look forward to your leadership on this issue.

Thank you as well for your leadership of our nation.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
U.S. Senator

It was nice to see you & your family on Sunday. Thanks for addressing this issue this morning.
AC