

Poll: Americans Overwhelmingly Oppose USDA's Proposal to Relax Food Safety Inspections in Pig Slaughter Plants

Washington, DC—In a strong public repudiation of the Trump Administration's controversial proposed changes to food safety inspections in pig slaughter plants, national polling released today reveals that an overwhelming majority of Americans—in all parts of the country and across party lines—opposes the U.S. Department of Agriculture's proposal to eliminate line speed limits in pork processing plants, reduce by 40 percent the number of government inspectors in these plants, and allow companies to design their own food safety programs.

By an overwhelming 28-point margin (64% to 36%), Americans opposed the USDA's proposal to eliminate the speed limits on pig slaughter lines. Current law limits line speeds to 1,106 pigs per hour; the USDA proposal would remove all speed limits. A stunning 70 percent of Midwesterners—those closest to the pig slaughter industry—opposed this proposed change.

Americans rejected two other major proposed changes to pig slaughter inspections—reducing the number of government inspectors in the plants and allowing companies to design their own food safety testing programs—by even larger margins. Almost three in four respondents (73%) opposed reducing the number of government inspectors on pig slaughter lines. Seven in ten (70%) rejected allowing companies to design their own microbiological testing programs to measure food safety, rather than requiring all companies to meet the same standard.

“The public, whom the USDA is supposed to protect, is not fooled when USDA officials claim their proposed changes will do no harm. Americans understand that by reducing and privatizing food safety inspections and allowing an unlimited increase in pig slaughter line speeds, the administration will further endanger tens of thousands of workers, consumers, and animal welfare,” said Deborah Berkowitz, worker safety and health program director at the National Employment Law Project, and former chief of staff at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. “If this rule goes through, we're likely to see an increase in serious work-related injuries and negative effects not only for the workers but for their families and communities.”

“By an overwhelming 46-point margin, consumers in this poll rejected the crux of the USDA proposal, which is to reduce the number of government inspectors and turn their inspection responsibilities over to the companies to do themselves,” said Wenonah Hauter, executive director of the non-profit advocacy organization Food & Water Watch. “It was rejected resoundingly by consumers of all political stripes. By reducing the number of inspectors, the companies would also be able to increase the slaughter line speeds, which the respondents in this poll also rejected. USDA should scuttle this proposal because it endangers food safety, worker safety, and animal health.”

“As the poll results show, consumers of all ages, political affiliations, economic status, races, and gender are not fooled by this rhetoric,” said Thomas Gremillion, director of food policy at the Consumer Federation of America. “Faster line speeds and fewer inspectors would mean greater food safety risks. Yet USDA does not have measures in place like pathogen performance standards to control these risks, or even to measure the impact of these proposed changes.”

“Removing all speed limits for pig slaughter lines is inherently reckless and will result in significant and devastating consequences for animal, worker, and, ultimately, consumer safety,” said Ingrid Seggerman, director of regulatory policy for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. “Under already-breakneck slaughter speeds, animal welfare records at plants are abysmal, revealing rough handling and botched slaughter practices. Abandoning speed maximums altogether would pressure already-taxed plant

workers to move even more animals faster and cause more instances of mishandling and conscious slaughter. Americans understand that faster is not always better, and overwhelmingly oppose the USDA's flawed rule. The ASPCA urges the OIG and Congress to listen to their voices and stop this misguided proposal."

Deborah Berkowitz of NELP concluded: "The USDA cut corners when developing this rule. They hid from the public their analysis of the impact of faster line speeds on workers during the legal comment period because the analysis did not support their findings. Because of these dubious practices, this rule is under investigation by the Office of Inspector General at the USDA. It is clear that if the USDA wants to uphold its mission to protect the public, it must withdraw this radical rule."

The poll was conducted by Hart Research Associates on behalf of NELP, ASPCA, Food & Water Watch, and Consumer Federation of America. Interviews were conducted online from July 18 to 21, 2019 among a representative national sample of 1,004 adults, with a margin of error of ± 3.1 percentage points.

Tony Corbo, Sr. Lobbyist

Food & Water Watch and Food & Water Action
1616 P Street, NW
Suite 300
Washington, DC 20036

O (202) 683-2449

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