

May 5 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

people of Northern Ireland. The United States remains prepared to assist in any way we can.

NOTE: The statement referred to Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom and Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of Ireland.

Memorandum on Reducing the Risk of *Listeria Monocytogenes*

May 5, 2000

*Memorandum for the Secretary of Agriculture,
the Secretary of Health and Human Services*

*Subject: Reducing the Risk of Listeria
Monocytogenes*

Food safety is a vital issue for all Americans. When people across this country sit down to a meal at home or in a restaurant, they expect that the food they eat will be safe. While the U.S. food supply is abundant, the marketplace has evolved from one dominated by minimally processed basic commodities for home preparation to one with an array of highly processed products that are ready-to-eat or require minimal preparation in the home.

To take account of the changes in the way Americans eat and to ensure that America's food supply remains safe, my Administration has made wide-ranging, dramatic improvements in food safety. We have worked successfully to revolutionize our meat and poultry inspection system, instituting scientific testing and pathogen reduction controls to target and reduce dangerous pathogens like *Salmonella* and *E. coli* O157:H7 and the illnesses they cause. We also have implemented an innovative system of preventative controls for the seafood industry, published industry guidance to improve the safety of fruits and vegetables, and taken steps to prevent unsafe imported foods from reaching American consumers. My Food Safety Initiative is now in its third year of improving food safety surveillance, outbreak response, education, research, and inspection. In 1998, I issued an Executive Order creating the President's Council on Food Safety (Council), which oversees Federal food safety research efforts and is currently developing a comprehensive, national food safety strategic plan. It is under the Council's auspices that my Administration produced last year an Egg Safety Action Plan with the goal of eliminating illnesses from *Salmonella Enteritidis* in eggs. Additionally, we launched a high-tech early warning system called PulseNet that uses DNA-

fingerprinting techniques to help us better detect and prevent outbreaks of foodborne illness.

These and other efforts have helped to make meaningful improvements in food safety. But we can do even more. Millions of Americans get sick from eating contaminated food each year. With changing patterns of food production and consumption, we must continue to aggressively meet the food safety challenges of the 21st century.

One challenge we must address immediately is that of *Listeria monocytogenes*, which can cause a severe infection called listeriosis. Listeriosis is a significant public health concern, and is especially lethal, resulting in death in about 20 percent of cases. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 2,518 persons become ill and 504 persons die each year from listeriosis. Pregnant women with listeriosis can pass the infection on to their unborn children, potentially resulting in severe illness or death to the fetus or newborn infant. Others at high risk for severe disease or death are the elderly and those with weakened immune systems. Ready-to-eat food products, such as lunch meats, smoked fish, certain types of soft cheeses, and hot dogs, are among the foods most commonly associated with food-related illness from *Listeria*. To address this serious public health problem, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture (USDA), is conducting a risk assessment on *Listeria monocytogenes* to determine which foods warrant further preventive measures. This risk assessment will be completed shortly, and I believe we must build on what is already being done to target this deadly organism.

My Administration's goal—articulated in our Healthy People 2010 plan—is to cut the number of illnesses caused by *Listeria* in half by 2010, from 0.5 cases to 0.25 cases per 100,000. To meet and exceed this goal, I hereby direct you,

in cooperation and consultation with the Council and relevant Federal agencies, to report back to me within 120 days on the aggressive steps you will take to significantly reduce the risk of illness and death by *Listeria monocytogenes* ready-to-eat foods. In particular, within this time period, I direct the Secretary of Agriculture to complete proposed regulations that include any appropriate microbiological testing and other industry measures to: 1) prevent cross-contamination in the processing environment; 2) ensure that the processing of ready-to-eat products meets appropriate standards; and 3) ensure that such products are safe throughout their shelf life. In addition, I direct the Secretary of Health and Human Services, within this time frame, to develop an action plan identifying additional steps necessary to reduce *Listeria monocytogenes* contamination. This plan should include consideration of control measures for at-risk foods and the publication of guidance

for processors, retailers, and food service facilities. Finally, you should consider whether enhanced labeling is necessary to provide additional safeguards for consumers. These actions should be based in science and should establish the foundation for a comprehensive approach that significantly reduces the opportunity for *Listeria* product contamination and *Listeria*-related illnesses to occur. All these actions, taken together, should allow us to achieve our Healthy People Goal by 2005 rather than 2010.

These steps will continue to ensure the safety of America's food supply and will help protect some of the Nation's most vulnerable populations from foodborne illness.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

NOTE: This memorandum was embargoed for release by the Office of the Press Secretary until 10:06 a.m. on May 6.

The President's Radio Address May 6, 2000

Good morning. Warm weather has finally taken hold in most of the country, and millions of families are now taking weekend picnics and hosting backyard barbecues. Today I want to speak with you about the foods we serve at these gatherings and how we can make them even safer than they already are.

Our food supply is the most bountiful in the world. And for 7 years now, our administration has been committed to making it the safest in the world. We've improved dramatically the Nation's inspection system for meat, poultry, and seafood. We've added new safeguards to protect families from unsafe imported foods. We've established a sophisticated early warning system that uses DNA fingerprinting techniques to detect and prevent outbreaks of foodborne illness. From farm to table, we've made great strides to ensure the safety of our food supply. But outbreaks of food-related illnesses are still far too prevalent. In fact, millions of Americans get sick from eating contaminated food each year.

One threat we must address immediately comes from a foodborne pathogen called *Listeria*, which has been the cause of recent recalls

of hot dogs and luncheon meats and several deadly outbreaks of disease. The most famous case emerged a year and a half ago, when *Listeria* killed 21 people and sickened 100 others, all of whom had eaten contaminated meat from a single plant. It was the Nation's most deadly food safety epidemic in 15 years.

Fortunately, *Listeria* is less common than *salmonella*, *E. coli*, and other foodborne bacteria, but unfortunately, it is far more dangerous. A staggering 20 percent of *Listeria* infections result in death. As with other food-borne bacteria, it's rarely healthy adults who come down with *Listeria* infections. Instead, it's the most vulnerable among us: infants, the elderly, pregnant women, and those whose immune systems have been weakened by chemotherapy or AIDS.

While our administration has already taken a number of important steps to reduce the threat of *Listeria*, it's clear we must do more to protect Americans from this deadly pathogen. So today I'm directing the Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services to prepare an aggressive new strategy to significantly reduce the risk of illness from *Listeria*. As part