

# Publicly releasing inspection data on meat processing facilities could have 'substantial benefits'

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Publicly posting enforcement and testing data corresponding to specific meat, poultry, and egg products' processing plants on the Internet could have "substantial benefits," including the potential to favorably impact public health, says a new report from the National Research Council. The report adds that the release of such data could contribute to increased transparency and yield valuable insights that go beyond the regulatory uses for which the data are collected.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is responsible for ensuring that meat, poultry, and processed egg products are safe, wholesome, and properly labeled. It collects voluminous amounts of data at thousands of processing facilities in support of its regulatory functions and is considering the release of two types of collected data on its website. These include inspection and enforcement data and sampling and testing data -- such as testing for the presence of food borne pathogens like [salmonella](#), pathogenic E. coli, and [listeria](#) monocytogenes. Some of this information is already available to the public via the Internet but is aggregated and does not contain names of specific processing facilities. However, most of the data FSIS collects, with the exception of information that is considered proprietary, can currently be obtained by the public through the [Freedom of Information Act](#) (FOIA).

The committee that wrote the report examined a substantial body of

literature documenting the impacts of disclosing establishment-specific regulatory information similar to that collected by FSIS. Based on this information, the committee believed there are strong arguments supporting the public release of FSIS data that contains the names of processing facilities on the Internet, especially data that are subject to release under FOIA, unless there is compelling evidence that it is not in the public interest to release them. Several potential benefits of releasing such data include enabling users to make more informed choices, motivating facilities to improve their performance, and allowing research studies of regulatory effectiveness and other performance-related issues. More specific benefits might include better understanding on the part of the public relative to the kinds of information that have been collected, such as a greater appreciation for the quality, complexity, and potential usability of the data for specific purposes. Even if individual firms do not change their behavior in response to data posting, overall food safety could improve if information about performance leads consumers to favor high-performing facilities, effectively resulting in a shift in the composition of the market.

The benefits of releasing FSIS data must be balanced against potential unintended adverse consequences, the report says. These could include impacts on facilities' profitability, possible misinterpretation of the data, pressure on inspector performance, and unintentional release of proprietary or confidential information. However, the committee concluded that while adverse impacts are possible, there is limited systematic evidence documenting their likelihood.

Because of the complexity of issues associated with public release of data with facility names and the potential for adverse effects, the report suggests the need for an effective disclosure plan to inform the process. For example, potential adverse effects could be minimized if FSIS ensures the data's integrity, provides definitions of what is being quantified, and is careful to protect confidential information associated

with particular facilities. To help make sure that the public release of the data will be useful, the committee suggested that FSIS define a timetable for its release and commit the resources necessary to allow the data's accessibility, quality, and timeliness.

Additionally, the report recommends that FSIS consult with other agencies that have released detailed regulatory data on the performance of individual facilities or firms, such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Enforcement and Compliance History Online (ECHO), the U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration, and several states and local public health departments that have released data on restaurant hygiene and inspection grading. The committee believes FSIS could build on these agencies' effective practices while designing its public data release program.

Provided by National Academy of Sciences

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