

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 28, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Democratic Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

As you consider additional legislative priorities addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge you to include a directive to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA FSIS) to halt higher-speed slaughter and processing systems for poultry, swine, and cattle. Directing USDA FSIS to retract previously granted approvals and suspend future approvals for plants to operate at line speeds higher than regulatory maximums and to suspend implementation of the New Swine Inspections System (NSIS), which allows facilities to operate without any line speed restrictions, will improve worker and inspector safety, help safeguard animal welfare, and better protect consumers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, not only has the Administration failed to protect meat and poultry workers and inspectors, but FSIS is increasing the safety risks for workers by approving line speed increases. In just the month of April, FSIS has approved at least 15 new requests from plants to exceed regulatory line speed maximums. Further, FSIS recently finalized the New Swine Inspection System, which revokes line speed maximums in slaughterhouses operating under that inspection model. By increasing slaughter line speeds, plant employees become even more susceptible to work-related injuries such as repetitive trauma disorders and amputations due to the need to work faster. Rather than increasing line speeds, the USDA should be working with processing plants to slow down line speeds in order to accommodate social distancing measures aimed at reducing the spread of the virus in such plants.

Increased line speeds not only threatens the safety of workers and inspectors but also undermines the enforcement of federal humane handling laws and regulations, subjecting some animals to rough handling and the possibility of regaining consciousness after failed stun attempts. Moreover, these systems jeopardize food safety and the USDA itself has concluded, in the absence of compensating measures, that higher line speeds result in more pathogen contamination.

Accordingly, we urge you to include language directing FSIS to retract previously granted approvals and suspend future approvals from poultry and meat plants to operate at speeds exceeding regulatory caps and to cease implementation of the New Swine Inspection System. In addition, Congress should direct the Government Accountability Office to conduct a study on how the USDA has responded to the rapid spread of COVID-19 in meat and poultry slaughter plants,

including an analysis of the impact of faster line speeds on plants' ability to maintain protections for employees, enforce regulations protecting animals from inhumane slaughter, and uphold food safety.

We thank you for your consideration and close attention to these priorities to support and protect workers, inspectors, animals, and food safety during this crisis.

Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator

/s/ Kirsten Gillibrand

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator