

**GAP TRANSITION PROPOSALS FOR FOOD SAFETY**Government Accountability Project (GAP)ⁱMark Cohen, Executive Director (markc@whistleblower.org),

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The objective of GAP's Food Safety Program is to end the threat to public health caused by unsafe food, unsustainable food production methods and inadequate inspection systems. GAP believes this requires a regulatory agency that is responsible to public health, not industry demands, and a workforce that is empowered to speak out about health and safety problems without fear of retaliation.

Promote whistleblower rights for USDA staff

Whistleblowers are the agency's and public's backstop against corruption, mismanagement, wrongdoing, and unsafe and unhealthy food practices. Too often, however, whistleblowers are treated by management as enemies rather than valued as conscientious public servants. The new Secretary of Agriculture should vocally support announce his support for whistleblower rights in the agency and for the quick adoption of pending reforms to the Whistleblower Protection Act.

Support supply chain transparency and the consumers' "right to know" where and how their food is produced

The USDA must create an effective trace-back process to discover the source of E. Coli or other pathogen outbreaks, and take quick action to recall dangerous foods from the marketplace before they harm consumers. Too often USDA has "blamed the victim" for these outbreaks, shutting down small processors whose only failing was in receiving tainted product from mega-slaughter houses, the real culprits. An equitable trace-back policy must follow contamination to its source.

Staff up the meat and poultry inspection programs to prevent contaminated and unwholesome products from reaching consumers

The USDA must act quickly to remedy the growing shortage of FSIS inspectors. Current recruitment efforts have failed to compensate for staff shortages, much less the impending inspector losses due to retirement. Adequate staffing is critical to retaining food safety. The new Secretary of Agriculture must act to remedy these shortages promptly and train the inspector force in vigorous inspection methods to restore confidence in our food safety system .

Hold organic food producers, handlers, certifying agents and government regulators accountable to the organic standards

The availability of foods free of pesticides and herbicides is a food safety issue. Companies that seek to market their products as "organic" should be strictly held to organics standards by the USDA. The Department must actively enforce quality control standards and promptly address refinements to organic standards.

The safety of the nation's food supply warrants the creation of an independent agency

The current division of food regulatory responsibility between the USDA and FDA is scientifically and organizationally irrational and indefensible. Food has always been a backwater concern at the FDA and despite the recent food scares, it will remain so. USDA is fundamentally an agriculture promotion agency and its food safety activities are subordinate to the Department's primary mission. Rather than try to knock a square food peg into a round FDA hole, or pretend that USDA isn't hopelessly conflicted in its food safety oversight, the administration should announce its support for the creation of an independent agency to oversee all federally regulated food products. That would provide immediate reassurance to a restless public, and relieve FDA and USDA of poorly fitting parts.

ⁱ The Government Accountability Project (GAP) is a 31-year-old nonprofit public interest group that promotes government and corporate accountability by advancing occupational free speech, defending whistleblowers, and empowering citizen activists.