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Bush Administration Prioritizes Trade Over Food Safety Report Makes Food Safety Recs for the Next Administration

Minneapolis – A Bush Administration interagency working group is pushing a flawed import food safety system that prioritizes trade considerations over public health, finds a new report by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

The report, "Import Food Safety in the Twilight of the Bush Administration" (at www.iatp.org) by IATP's Steve Suppan, analyzes the recommendations of the Interagency Working Group on Import Safety—established by the Bush Administration following a series of recalls of contaminated and hazardous pet foods and toys imported from China last year. U.S. food imports are projected to greatly expand in the next decade. About 60 percent of fruits and vegetables, and 75 percent of seafood currently consumed in the U.S. are imported.

Many of the IWG's 14 recommendations and 50 action steps are designed to reduce import inspection and testing and instead emphasize safety certification of foreign export facilities, the report found. The IWG recommendations rely largely on exporters and importers to implement voluntary prevention controls against food and feed contamination. This approach extrapolates internationally the highly criticized U.S. food safety management system whose breakdowns resulted in large meat product recalls in 2007, culminating in the February 2008 recall of 143 million pounds of ground beef.

"The IWG report prioritizes the trade objectives of the food industry, rather than ensuring a safer food supply for consumers," said Suppan. "Many of the regulatory tools proposed by the IWG have exposed U.S. consumers to unsafe or potentially unsafe food when implemented domestically. The Administration's proposal was developed with the help of industry to avoid greater rates of physical inspection and testing. This off-shoring and outsourcing of product safety provides another layer of plausible deniability for corporate liability prevention."

The Bush Administration approach shifts some legal responsibility for U.S. import safety from U.S. agencies and importers to foreign exporters. A new Administration should instead more tightly regulate the importing companies over which the U.S. government has jurisdiction, the report recommends.

"Fortunately, there are steps that the next Administration could take to prioritize public health and greatly improve the safety of our food," said Suppan. The report's recommendations for the next Administration include:

- Increasing the number of inspectors at our ports with better inspection technology;
- Allowing regulators to limit the number of ports of entry for high risk products;
- Allowing regulators to suspend import licenses for repeated failure to comply with food safety and other import rules;
- Incentivizing importer compliance with import requirements by establishing an importer performance bond that would be reimbursable according to the importer's compliance rate.

IATP works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems.