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Statement Of the American Meat Institute On FDA Listeria Risk Assessment

October 21, 2003

(Attribute Statement to American Meat Institute President J. Patrick Boyle)

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"The FDA-USDA *Listeria* Risk Assessment will help government, industry and consumers take actions that will enhance food safety and reduce foodborne illnesses. As FDA noted in a press teleconference today, actions like keeping products cold from plant to retail to the home and using products promptly can have a substantial positive impact on food safety.

Industry's own efforts at the plant level are yielding remarkable results. Just last week, USDA indicated that the incidence of *L. monocytogenes* in processed meat and poultry products is at an all-time low -- down 70 percent since the HACCP-based meat inspection system was implemented in 1998. Illnesses attributable to *L. monocytogenes* have significantly declined and even today approach the National Health Objective goal set for 2010.

Unfortunately, these declines, and the results of industry's efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate *Listeria*, are not fully reflected in this latest version of the risk assessment because they were only recently released. Although the risk assessment is helpful in focusing regulatory and industry resources, the risk assessment does not fully reflect the current impact of government and industry activities in controlling *L. monocytogenes*.

A draft version of this risk assessment, released several years ago, guided the industry and government to take additional steps to reduce *L. monocytogenes* on ready-to-eat meat and poultry products. Actions taken include:

- Training of industry and federal inspection staff through comprehensive *Listeria* control workshops.
- The use of a thermal treatment after a product has been packaged to destroy *L. monocytogenes*.
- Use of new ingredients to inhibit the growth of *L. monocytogenes* on ready-to-eat meat and poultry. Many products now contain these ingredients.
- Development of new principles for processing equipment design that facilitate sanitation and reduce the possibility of bacteria being "harbored" in tiny spaces like the thread of an exposed screw or a hollow roller on a conveyer belt.
- Sophisticated new environmental sampling programs that work to target *Listeria* in the plant environment so it can be

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destroyed before it is transferred to products.

- Research to discover new technologies.
- Declaration by the meat and poultry industry that food safety is a "non-competitive issue," which resulted in the free exchange of food safety information among competitors.

Listeriosis is one of the rarest foodborne illnesses tracked by the Centers for Disease Control, though it is among the most serious when it occurs. Consumers who are pregnant, immune-compromised or of advanced age needn't avoid deli meats and hot dogs, but should keep the products cold during storage, should use them promptly and should follow the CDC's recommendations to reheat these products to steaming hot prior to consuming them. When these steps are taken, the products are safe for all consumers and the risk of listeriosis is virtually reduced to zero."

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