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The President's Radio Address

July 3, 1999

Good morning. This Independence Day at backyard barbecues and picnics in local parks, Americans celebrate the spirit of patriotism that has strengthened our Nation for 223 years now. Today I want to talk about what we must do to ensure that the food we serve at those gatherings is as safe as we can possibly make it, to keep our Nation growing healthy, as well as strong.

Our food supply is the most bountiful in the world. And for 6½ years, our administration has been committed to making it the safest in the world, from establishing a nationwide early warning system for foodborne illness to expanding food safety research and public education programs to increasing inspections of food at every point in the chain of production.

Last year I established the Joint Institute for Food Safety Research and appointed the first-ever President's Council on Food Safety to coordinate and expand food safety efforts at every level of the Federal Government. I'm proud of the progress we're making, but when it comes to keeping our families safe, we can always do more—and we must.

Today, Americans eat more imported food than ever before, and they have more choices than ever. Think of it: Thirty years ago, just a dozen kinds of fruits and vegetables were available year-round. Today, you could buy a different kind of fruit or vegetable every day of the year, and many were grown on the other side of the world. There's no evidence that these fruits and vegetables are less safe than those grown here in the United States. But some recent outbreaks of foodborne illness have been traced to imported foods.

Our import laws are very clear. We will not allow unsafe food to enter the United States. But a recent GAO report showed that some importers are sidestepping our laws and getting contaminated food across our borders and onto our kitchen tables. While most importers comply with our regulations, it only takes one bad apple to spoil the whole bunch, only one shipment of contaminated food to threaten hundreds, even thousands, of Americans.

That is why today, consistent with our international obligations, I'm directing the Treasury Department and the Health and Human Services Department to take immediate action to keep unsafe food from crossing our borders. First, we will take new steps to stop port shopping, preventing importers whose unsafe food has been turned away at one U.S. port from slipping their goods in at another. To make sure this unsafe food can be easily spotted, we will stamp all rejected food with the clear label, ''Refused U.S.''

Second, Customs and the FDA will rigorously enforce and expand our policy of destroying imported food that poses a serious health threat rather than risk letting it reach our grocery stores or the global market.

Third, we'll do more to deter dishonest importers by increasing the bond they must post while food is being inspected for safety. Too many importers forfeit their bonds as a simple cost of doing business. That's wrong, and we should stop it. These steps will help us to close the gaps in our food safety system.

But Congress must also act. I'm grateful for the presence here today of Congressman Dingell and Congressman Brown. Congress should start by passing comprehensive food safety legislation that would increase the FDA's authority to turn away imported food that does not meet our high safety standards. And Congress should grant USDA the authority to impose civil penalties and to order mandatory recalls of unsafe meat and poultry.

Finally, Congress should fully fund my $72 million food safety initiative to increase the number of agents and inspections of high-risk food products right here at home and increase the number of inspections of foreign food processors around the world.

Americans have a right to know that the food they serve their families is safe, whether it comes from the far corners of the world or the corner produce stand. I'm pleased that so many Members of Congress are committed to giving them that security. I appreciate the initiatives, especially of Senator Durbin and Representatives Dingell and Brown, along with Senators Mikulski, Kennedy, Harkin, Collins, and Representatives

Eshoo and Waxman. I look forward to working with all Members of Congress of both parties to build a stronger nation with a healthier food supply for the 21st century.

Have a happy and healthy Fourth of July, and thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 12:37 p.m. on July 2 in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on July 3. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on July 2 but was embargoed for release until the broadcast.

Memorandum on the Safety of Imported Foods

July 3, 1999

Memorandum for the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Secretary of the Treasury

Subject: Safety of Imported Foods

While the United States has one of the safest food supplies in the world, outbreaks of foodborne illness are still all too prevalent. Millions of Americans are stricken by illness each year from foods they consume, and thousands, mostly the very young and the elderly, die as a result. The threats come from a variety of sources, including both imported and domestically produced foods.

Foodborne illness is difficult to control in a changing world. Consumers enjoy a greater variety of foods than they did 50 years ago, including a greater emphasis on food from all around the world. Americans also eat more foods prepared outside their homes, such as foods prepared in grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and day care centers. We also are seeing the emergence of new foodborne pathogens such as the highly virulent E. Coli O157:H7.

For these reasons, my Administration has made food safety a high priority. I have requested substantial annual increases to fund food safety initiatives such as a nationwide early warning system for foodborne illness, increased inspections, and the expansion of food safety research, risk assessment, and education. In January of 1997, I directed the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency to identify specific steps to improve the safety of the food supply. In October of 1997, I expanded my initiative to provide special emphasis on the safety of domestic and imported fruits and vegetables. Last year at this time, I announced the creation of a Joint Institute for Food Safety Research (JIFSR) to develop a strategic plan for conducting food safety research and efficiently coordinating all Federal food safety research. In August of 1998, I issued an Executive order to create the President's Council on Food Safety, which is charged with (1) developing a comprehensive plan for all Federal food safety activities, (2) advising agencies of food safety priorities and developing coordinated food safety budgets, and (3) overseeing the JIFSR. We have made significant steps domestically to help ensure the safety of our food supply.

Today, I am expanding my Administration's food safety efforts even further to focus on the safety of imported foods. While the majority of imported food is safe, problems do exist. These problems are the result of two major changes. At the turn of the century, relatively few foods were imported, but today, we are seeing a dramatic increase in the importation of foods. Imports have doubled over the past 7 years and, based on recent trends, we expect at least an additional 30 percent increase by 2002. Finished and fully packaged food products account for an increasing proportion of all imported foods and there has been a huge increase in fresh produce from all over the world.

While there is no evidence that imported foods pose more of a risk than domestic foods and most importers comply with the applicable requirements, there are a few "bad actor" importers who violate the rules and work to subvert the system. We must give the agencies responsible for food safety the tools necessary to deal with the importers who try to break the rules. While the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspects domestic facilities, it has, in conjunction with the United States Customs Service (Customs), relied primarily on border inspection to ensure the safety of imported foods.

I recognize that there are limitations on our resources and statutory authority to take