USDA
ORAL HISTORY
CATHY WOTECKI
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00:00:24:21 Q: Today is October 20th of the year 2000. I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington. Today we're speaking with Dr. Catherine Wotecki who is the Under Secretary for Food Safety at USDA. Dr. Wotecki, when did you assume your position as Under Secretary for Food Safety?

00:00:43:01 A: Three years and two months ago in August of 1997.

00:00:49:22 Q: Now you were actually the first nominated Under Secretary for Food Safety as I understand it.

00:00:56:18 A: That's correct. I'm the first person to fill this position. It was created during the reorganization of 1994. Mike Taylor who at that point was the administrator of the Food Safety and Inspection Service, acted in the capacity of Under Secretary. But I was the first one nominated and confirmed.

00:01:17:10 Q: This wasn't your first time to be at USDA.

00:01:20:10 A: That's right. Early in my career I was a scientist with the Agriculture Research Service. So for three years I headed what was called the Food and Diet Appraisal Research Group and had offices in Hyattsville and some laboratory space at Beltsville.

00:01:39:08 Q: Then between your first appointment and your more recent appointment where did you work then?

00:01:45:02 A: I went first to the Centers for Disease Control. I worked at one of the centers that's located here in the Washington, D. C. area called the National Center for Health Statistics. I was the Deputy Director for Health Examination statistics which were the surveys, the big national surveys, in which you do actual medical examinations, physical examinations of the population.

00:02:12:00 We did an enormous amount of public health oriented research from those data that we collected. My training is in human nutrition and epidemiology. So that was a

seven-year really intense research experience. From the National Center for Health Statistics I was recruited by the National Academy of Sciences to head up the Food and Nutrition Board.

00:02:42:06 The Academy is a private organization, but it does have a Congressional charter. That charter requires the Academy to respond to the government whenever it asks for scientific advice. So the studies that we did when I was at the Food and Nutrition Board were studies that established recommendations for nutrition during pregnancy and lactation including recommendations for example for weight gain for women who are pregnant.

00:03:17:13 We also did a lot of food safety work which is where I first got involved with the food safety. We published something that's called the Food Chemicals Codex which are the purity criteria for food grade chemicals. We also did some major studies of the safety of seafood for the National Marine Fisheries Service of the Commerce department.

00:03:42:22 We made recommendations to USDA when they asked us to review the streamlined inspection system for cattle that was one of the systems that was tested to try to determine what changes could be made in meat inspection to improve that system.

00:04:03:13 So I got involved quite a bit in food safety issues at that time.

00:04:07:28 Q: But your background certainly was well suited for the new job that was created. But if it meant that it was important enough to establish a new position I expect you were almost in crisis management from the beginning.

00:04:19:27 A: We definitely were in crisis management from the beginning. Shortly after I was confirmed, within days, we received a notice from the Centers for Disease Control and the State of Colorado that they had an outbreak of ecoli 0157-H7 infections.

00:04:43:17 That outbreak was being traced to hamburger. That outbreak investigation which FSIS conducted--the Food Safety and Inspection Service--led to one company and one plant of that company and resulted in what was the largest recall that had ever been requested up till that point in time, twenty-five million pounds of hamburger.

00:05:12:18 Q: So you barely had time to establish an infrastructure before you were off and working in a very serious area.

00:05:20:06 A: Exactly. I had thought being confirmed in the month of August that since August is usually a fairly quiet month around Washington that I'd have at least a month to get immersed in the regulations and other aspects of the work of the agency. But that was not the case at all because it ended up that there was a very slow news month that month unlike this year when we've got the elections going.

00:05:53:00 The press attention to the outbreak was incredible. Almost daily all of the major news media--television,

radio and the print press--were in asking for interviews, asking for more information about the status of the outbreak investigation as well as the recall.

00:06:22:16 So it was almost daily that we were having to deal with the crisis itself and the decision-making surrounding the recall events which continued to unfold over a period of several weeks. The first estimates were that it was quite a small amount of product that was affected, and it became apparent as more investigation was done at the plant directly that there was a very much larger amount of product that was involved.

00:06:59:13 So managing that as well as responding to the demands for the media was quite an intense breaking in period.

00:07:08:06 Q: It was hardly time to develop any goals for what you wanted to do, but I expect you had in your mind your own personal achievements that you would like to work on as you came into this position. Do you remember what some of those were?

00:07:23:08 A: Oh I remember very clearly because there were three. One of them was the implementation of a new science-based approach towards poultry inspection. That though was not something that I created. It actually was the result of the work of many people over a long period in time. To kind of go back and trace a little bit the developments that led up to that goal.

00:07:55:26 The scientific community, the public health community and those people at FSIS who had responsibilities for the meat inspection program had for a long time realized that we needed to make changes in the way that we conducted those inspections because everybody recognized that the visual inspection that was done--it's referred to as organolectic (ph.) inspection, but it's essentially a visual inspection--was unable to detect micro-organisms.

00:08:36:13 It's unable to detect drug residues. It's unable to detect other types of chemical residues that are unwanted

and perhaps even unsafe in meat and poultry products. It was for that reason that we needed to move to a more scientific based approach. But we haven't had the political will to do it.

00:09:03:25 There was actually another outbreak that occurred right at the beginning of the Clinton administration at the end of '92, beginning of '93 in the Pacific northwest that affected over 700 people and for which there were four deaths.

00:09:21:28 That outbreak really galvanized the political will to do something about the meat inspection system. There had been recommendations that had been made in the 1980s and recommendations in 1985 from the National Academy of Sciences to move to a more scientifically-based inspection system.

00:09:46:15 So when I came in with all of that preceding me and also with the work that Mike Taylor who was administrator up until shortly before I was appointed and Tom Billy who

then became the administrator, the work they had done really established the rule, the new regulation that created this new approach.

00:10:10:16 So I knew from the moment that I came in that the major thing, the top priority that I was gonna have was to see that the implementation of that new system was successful. So that goal was clear. I at the time actually in interviews when people would ask that question well what do you want to accomplish while you're hear told them a successful Hassop implementation.

00:10:39:20 That will be the one thing that if it is done well will be the one aspect that we will be credit for, and if it's done poorly it will certainly be something that we will bare the blame for. So that was my top priority. But the other two were very important also and necessary for not only what was being done in Hassop implementation but also to set the stage for what is gonna occur in the future.

00:11:15:11 My other two priorities, the first one of them was improving the base, the scientific base and the base for the risk assessments that the agency is conducting that are now being used in the development of policies on food safety.

00:11:35:08 Through the President's food safety initiative we've been able to dramatically increase the amount of funding for food safety research, most of that being done by ARS but also a substantial amount being done at universities through funding from the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service.

00:11:58:07 We've also as I mentioned established risk assessment as the way that we are using to develop policy to--particularly as it relates to microbiological hazards in food. It's a very science intense process to conduct those risk assessments.

00:12:21:10 So that was my second area of priority. The third was education and training. In order to successfully

implement Hassop we had to retrain our entire workforce. In order to make sure that the food that is produced under Hassop inspection in federally-inspected and in state-inspected plants that that food remains safe.

00:12:48:29 Everybody who's in the distribution system all the way up to the person who prepares the meal and serves it needs to be aware of some fairly fundamental aspects of food safety and what their responsibility is to assure a safe product. So we've entered into a number of partnerships with other federal agencies, consumer organizations and private companies and a number of the professional societies as well--medical associations and the dietetic association--to develop a consumer education program.

00:13:27:12 It's a campaign that goes by the title "Fight Bac", back for bacteria. We also have developed training and education programs in the transportation area. We've encouraged similar types of programs to begin to be developed in the retail area. So we're very much involved in training and education.

00:13:55:15 At the pre-harvest point, the actual on-farm, on-ranch production of animals that will be brought to slaughter, FSIS has also worked collaboratively with the states to encourage education programs at the producer level.

00:14:21:20 Certainly there's an enormous amount of research that needs to be done to inform those education and training programs at the producer level, but there are some things already that can be and are the subject of those education and training programs. So that was my third major emphasis.

00:14:42:20 Q: It sounds like the three of them are so interrelated that they really had to go in tandem along for you to make progress on the Hassop you needed the education and the training.

00:14:53:14 A: Exactly. One of the things that is quite unique about the food safety mission area as compared to the other mission areas within the department is that our focus,

our mission is so tightly defined to improve the safety of meat and poultry products and egg products that it's very easy to articulate, somewhat harder sometimes to actually develop and deliver.

00:15:27:27 But the mission is very tightly focused. In some of the other mission areas it's a very broad mission. But ours is quite well defined.

00:15:38:11 Q: How have you done with your goals?

00:15:40:28 A: I think we've done pretty well. On the first one, on the Hassop implementation, we have by every measure that I have been using been very successful. The levels of pathogen on product by two different measures--the prevalence of pathogen in product are down twenty-five to fifty percent depending on the type of meat or poultry product.

00:16:10:27 The second measure is the actual numbers of pathogens. Although we don't have as much data on that as we do on

prevalence the numbers and types of pathogens are also--that we've been monitoring--are also down very substantially.

00:16:28:10 So that's one measure, pathogens on product. The second is we have an external measure. The Centers for Disease Control has been conducting active disease surveillance in sites around the country. We started with five, grew that up to seven. We're now at eight of these sites around the country.

00:16:56:05 Their active disease surveillance in those sites has demonstrated a decrease in human illnesses associated with these major pathogens that we've been tracking on the products. So it gives me a lot of confidence that the evidence that we've been seeing on products with declines in pathogens in products is also being reflected by a decrease in human illnesses as well.

00:17:32:04 So by that measure I think we've done very well. But the second measure is the industry's performance because food

safety and implementation of a system as sprawling as Hassop has been really had required that the industry assume more responsibility for the safety of its products.

00:17:55:25 I firmly believe that that's an appropriate level of responsibility on the industry. But the industry has a compliance rate with these new regulations that's 92% or better. That is a remarkable level of compliance for a change that has been as dramatic as Hassop has been.

00:18:22:02 So industry has really done very well. Then the third measure we've been using has been whether there've been a large number of plants that have closed as a result of having to change the way that they go about assuring the safety of their products, essentially implementing Hassop.

00:18:43:08 We saw over the six thousand federally-inspected plants that came under this system over this last three years that there were only about two dozen plants that closed.

Most of those were in the category of very small plants. They employed fewer than ten people.

00:19:09:07 Most of those were also plants in which the owners were older and close to retirement and probably didn't have someone to buy the business or a family member who was willing to carry it on. So we really tried to keep track of what the effect of this new regulatory approach was going to be on the structure of the industry and really has not had any major affects on the structure of meat and poultry industry.

00:19:44:07 Q: What about your second goal?

00:19:46:04 A: On science. I think we've done fairly well there as well. In the reorganization of '94 the major research responsibilities were placed in the agriculture research service. Regulatory agencies like FSIS no longer conduct their own research.

00:20:13:12 They had always looked largely to ARS to provide it, but

at that point then all of our research was centralized in ARS. We have worked very closely with ARS to develop a research agenda. We have seen that there are new products, new technologies that are coming out as a result of those collegial identification of research priorities.

00:20:48:00 We also--I had mentioned a few minutes ago that the President's Food Safety Initiative which beginning in '97 identified research and risk assessment as being an area that was in need of increased investment. Through the Food Safety Initiative we've been able to almost double the funding for food safety research that agriculture sponsors.

00:21:20:21 So the majority of that has gone to ARL's and some also has gone into the competitive grants program. So the increase in funding is a good measure also of the success. On the area of risk assessment we've really pioneered the application of this approach to microbes, to pathogens in foods.

00:21:53:06 We--we meaning FSIS along with a team of scientists that included ARS and scientists from universities--completed the first ever risk assessment farm to table for a pathogen in a food product. It was for salmonella enteritidis in eggs. That risk assessment we've now used as the basis, again under the President's Food Safety Initiative, for proposing a complete change in the way that FDA and FSIS regulate the safety of egg products--eggs and egg products.

00:22:38:22 So that risk assessment provided the information that then fed into the development of this new approach. So I'm really pleased that we got the risk assessment completed, the first of it, and we're actually able then to use it in the development of a whole new approach towards egg safety.

00:23:02:06 We're continuing with other risk assessments, one for ecoli 0157-H7 in hamburger which has also been a chronic problem throughout certainly my tenure as Under Secretary

and at this point looks like it's going to continue to be problematic as a public health problem for the future.

00:23:26:11 So this risk assessment is going to provide some additional insights into ways that we can go about improving the safety of hamburger.

00:23:36:02 Q: How have you done with educating industry. Obviously the public has been a lot more aware of food safety than we might have ever been in the 80s. In the 90s they certainly know the results of food safety products.

00:23:48:27 A: We have some polls that we rely on. A number of them are done by groups that are in the private sector like the Food Marketing Institute that report on consumer knowledge and attitudes about food safety. It's been good to see that pathogens are now being recognized by the public as a more important food safety problem.

00:24:20:09 Also that there are at least they know that there are some things that they can do to protect themselves like

washing their hands and cooking foods appropriately and showing them. It's been harder to gauge within industry what the level of knowledge and skills are.

00:24:42:08 There are not the broad public opinion surveys like the ones I referred to that FMI has done. We have been working as I said through partnership approaches with industry to improve training. One of those that was I think a good effort was the Hassop training that was done by industry for its members and particularly by the trade associations in the meat and poultry businesses that trained their members about what they needed to know to implement Hassop.

00:25:24:18 So from that perspective that was a training effort that did what needed to be done and I think the measures certainly for Hassop implementation are a good indication of it certainly seems to have been successful.

00:25:43:11 Q: Where do you go from here for the future of food safety?

00:25:46:23 A: I think there are several directions that are clear. One is that now that we do have the techniques to identify pathogens and to identify outbreaks much earlier and in greater quantities than we've been able to detect outbreaks before that this is going to remain a public health issue.

00:26:16:25 It's going to remain an issue that the public is going to be aware of because there's going to continue to be media coverage of large outbreaks. I also think though that the science is going to bring us techniques that will reduce pathogens in food.

00:26:38:08 Particularly in the meat and poultry area I think that on farm interventions are going to prove to be far more effective than techniques that rely only on a step during processing. Now we have relied up until now on what we call--usually it's called kill step.

00:27:03:13 It involves heating something, exposing it to radiation

or some other step that will essentially kill those micro-organisms. But for produce and for things that are minimally processed it's really those on-farm interventions that are gonna net us some big improvements in food safety.

00:27:26:06 The second direction that I think we're going to see is that some of the issues related to residues whether they're antibiotic residues or chemical residues are going to re-surface as being something that needs our attention and scrutiny.

00:27:51:00 We're beginning to see those concerns being raised already. So I think that's certainly gonna be an area that is going to require greater scrutiny in the future.

00:28:03:05 Q: As you think about your time as Under Secretary for Food Safety what would be some of your special memories or maybe ones that have been not as special but are troubling and challenging?

00:28:16:02 A: I guess one special memory is visiting the first beef and pork slaughter plants that I ever visited. I came out of the research and policy communities and having worked as I told you in research positions and at the National Academy of Science. I had never been in a slaughter or processing plant.

00:28:42:11 I've been in other parts of the food industry and bakeries and canneries and that type of food processing. So shortly after I came into the job I made it a point to go out and visit poultry and beef and pork plants and get to know how they operated. So that was quite a surprise.

00:29:11:06 It is a very, very harsh working environment for our inspectors and for everybody who works in those plants. So that was definitely an eye-opener.

00:29:26:04 Q: When you think about the public's need to know this it's been such an important role. How do you feel about your part in that role and having this opportunity?

00:29:37:19 A: I guess it's always hard to be the first. It certainly set a model for expectations of how this job will be done in the future. I have tried very hard to use this position to establish a public health focus within the Department of Agriculture.

00:30:04:03 I believe very firmly that agriculture has a very strong public health role to play both in the perspective of nutrition and more broadly in health protection. I just a couple of months ago was quite struck when I read a very famous microbiologist who was speaking about what the emerging disease problems are for humans.

00:30:41:13 He remarked that 70% of human illnesses, emerging human illnesses come from animals. So they are animal diseases that jump the barrier to humans. So it really it emphasized to me that not only my office in food safety but also the extremely important role that AFIS plays in animal and plant health protection.

00:31:15:29 They are in many ways operating as a public health agency. The research that we rely on to develop an understanding of these animal diseases and those that cross over into people that the critical role that agriculture research in universities and at ARS play in that.

00:31:38:23 So for me establishing this public health focus has been really a major contribution I hope that I will have made and that future Under Secretaries for Food Safety will see as being their mission.

00:31:56:19 Q: Thank you Dr. Catherine Wotecki, Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture for being with us to talk about your time as Under Secretary. I'm Larry Quinn with USDA's Office of Communications in Washington.

00:32:10:25 **(END OF TAPE)**