September 11, 2013

The Honorable Kirsten E. Gillibrand
U.S. Senate
478 Russell Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Gillibrand,

Thank you for your leadership in protecting families from preventable foodborne diseases by introducing the Safe Meat and Poultry Act. The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nonprofit health advocacy and education organization focused on food safety and nutrition issues. We are supported principally by the 900,000 subscribers to Nutrition Action HealthLetter and by foundation grants. We accept no government or industry funding.

The average consumer eats about 130 pounds of beef, pork, and poultry every year. Yet consumers are often not fully aware of the risks these products pose to their health. Between 1998 and 2010, meat and poultry products were linked to at least 1,714 outbreaks involving over 33,000 illnesses. CSPI documented these outbreaks in “Risky Meat” earlier this year, finding that chicken and ground beef top the scale of high-risk foods. Meanwhile, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in April there has been no change in the overall incidence of foodborne illnesses. Although, meat and poultry plants are required to have preventive food safety programs, more needs to be done if we are to make progress on protecting consumers from unsafe food.

The Safe Meat and Poultry Act corrects weaknesses in our meat and poultry inspection program at the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). It focuses attention on emerging pathogens and those that put public health at greatest risk. It also provides the Undersecretary of Food Safety with new authority to protect consumers from contaminated meat and poultry. This includes mandatory recall authority, testing requirements, improved oversight of imported meat and poultry, new traceability requirements, and better enforcement tools. It also assures more humane handling of live birds prior to slaughter, and improves food safety education and research at FSIS. Each of these reforms is essential to improving our food safety system and protecting consumers’ health.

CSPI applauds your efforts to ensure food placed on the family table is safe and we urge Congress to pass the Safe Meat and Poultry Act.

Sincerely,

David W. Plunkett,
Senior Staff Attorney