Statement of Caroline Smith DeWaal, Director of Food Safety,
Center for Science in the Public Interest on
The Safety of Imported Foods

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My name is Caroline Smith DeWaal, and I am director of food safety for the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). CSPI is a nonprofit organization focused on food safety and nutrition, representing over 900,000 consumers. Last year, consumers’ confidence in the safety of food they purchase at restaurants and grocery stores declined dramatically – by 16 percent. We believe this Congress should take strong and decisive action to signal to consumers that things are about to change when it comes to ensuring the safety of the food supply.

Imported food is a growing portion of the American diet. In fact, over ten percent of the average American diet is imported food products. For certain commodities, like seafood, imported products form the bulk of the American diet. But recent events have made imported food coming from China deeply suspect. In fact, in July eighty three percent of shoppers expressed concerned about food sourced from China.

This concern for food safety – especially imported foods — is understandable given the large number of outbreaks and recalls we experienced last year. Recently, the Bush Administration and the food industry have both admitted that the systems in place today are not sufficient to ensure the safety of imported foods. These are clear signs that the time is right for Congress to act on reforming the country’s food safety laws.

For years, CSPI has advocated for a new legal structure to modernize FDA’s food safety program, a structure that includes preventive controls and performance standards among its core elements. The food industry’s “Four Pillars” reform proposal contains several areas of agreement on which solutions to our food safety problems can be built. Congress also appears ready to adopt a modern regulatory oversight program and fund it adequately to fulfill its mission. Just last week it passed a Sense of Congress stating this intent. And the emergence of coalitions of traditionally estranged consumer and industry organizations gives Congress a unique opportunity to appeal to many constituencies as it rebuilds the Food and Drug Administration.

Change is hard, but it has been done before, and in many different countries. The United Kingdom reformed its food safety program to establish a single Food Standards Agency in 1999. That agency has proven effective in reducing the incidence of foodborne illness and building public confidence. Foodborne illneses declined 18 percent within the first three years of the new agency. Public confidence in the safety of the food supply rose from 44 percent to 60 percent. The change came after food scares from mad cow disease and foot and mouth disease in the 1990s led all sides to recognize the need for change and that built momentum to reach a
workable compromise. I believe we are at the same nexus of crisis and consensus in this country that Britain faced in the 1990’s and that the momentum for building a stronger food safety system is clearly growing.

In order to restore consumer confidence, Congress must enact comprehensive legislation to address today’s food safety problems, both foreign and domestic. Preventive control systems implemented by the food industry and performance standards monitored and enforced by the government must form the heart of needed reforms to FDA’s legal structure. Only comprehensive reform will protect the food supply and restore consumer confidence in its safety. Congress is urged to take action this year to modernize food safety laws in the U.S. and to fully fund federal food safety programs.

A number of bills have been introduced to improve the safety of imported foods, as well as more comprehensive legislation contained in the Safe Food Act. U.S. food safety laws are more than a century old and were not designed to deal with modern issues, such as escalating imports, bioterrorism, or tainted produce. Legislation is needed that creates a program that puts public health at the forefront of food safety in America. We urge Congress to take action before the next Congressional election to modernize food safety laws in the U.S. and to dramatically increase funding to the Food and Drug Administration.