November 19, 2003

Honorable Ann Veneman
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Building
14th Street & Independence Avenue, S.W.
Room 200-A
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Veneman:

As Thanksgiving approaches, people are preparing to host holiday feasts to celebrate this important day. Last year, USDA gave consumers useful information to protect their families from the hazards posed by contaminated turkey. This year, however, USDA has all but stopped testing turkeys for Salmonella.

On behalf of our 700,000 American members, the Center for Science in the Public Interest urges the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to test turkeys for Salmonella and Campylobacter contamination and to annually provide the public with comparative data for plants that market whole turkeys. Currently, Salmonella is estimated to cause 1.3 million illnesses, 15,000 hospitalizations, and over 500 deaths a year. Campylobacter causes two million illnesses per year.

For the first time in 2002, consumers had government data to help guide them in purchasing safer turkeys. The USDA conducted Salmonella tests on turkey from 38 plants including some of the largest whole turkey producers. With that information consumers, could compare the performance of different companies and purchase turkeys from plants with the best safety records. This year, the Food Safety Inspection Service only conducted Salmonella tests of one turkey producer, the Michigan Turkey Producers Cooperative, according to the agency’s response to CSPI’s request for turkey testing data.
Each year, shoppers would like to base their buying decisions on government testing data, instead of guessing at the safety of their turkey. The CSPI urges the USDA to regularly test whole turkeys for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* and to give that information to the public.

Sincerely,

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Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Director

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Caroline Smith DeWaal
Director, Food Safety Program

cc:  Senator Thad Cochran
      Senator Tom Harkin
      Senator Robert F. Bennett
      Senator Herb Kohl
      Representative Robert W. Goodlatte
      Representative Charles Stenholm
      Representative Henry Bonilla
      Representative Marcy Kaptur
      Representative Rose DeLauro
      Representative Tom Latham