

August 16, 2017

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

The following organizations write to strongly oppose any proposed rule that would increase line speeds in poultry plants within the United States above the current 140 birds per minute (bpm). We were alarmed by the recent letter from Congressman Doug Collins (GA) requesting an increase in the line speed to 175 bpm, and we take issue with many of the claims therein. Most significantly, we are deeply concerned that any line speed increase would jeopardize the health and safety of both poultry workers and consumers at large.

Even at current speeds, poultry slaughter and processing workers face serious job hazards that result in debilitating illness, injury, or death.¹ Indeed, workers in poultry plants are injured at almost twice the rate of workers in private industry. These workers face over seven times the national average of occupational illnesses, such as repetitive motion injuries.² And, as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) noted, these rates are likely underreported.

Increasing the line speed by a full 25 percent to a shocking 175 bpm—or 3 birds per second—would only make a bad situation worse. This is evident for anyone who has visited a poultry plant. Workers stand, shoulder to shoulder, in cramped quarters, amid deafening noise and slippery conditions. They make thousands of forceful cuts a day at break-neck speed, using sharp knives and scissors, with acidic chemicals sprayed over the meat, and onto the skin, and into the eyes, nose and throat of the workers, as the meat moves down the line. A single wrong move could lead to an amputated finger or life-threatening cut. And cumulatively, these repetitive movements cause irreparable damage to the nerves, tendons, and muscles of the workers.

Despite Congressman Collins' claim that production line speed is unrelated to worker health, experts are convinced otherwise.³ For instance, according to the Government Accountability Organization (GAO), "High line speeds resulting from increased automation and other factors may exacerbate hazards. . . . [L]ine speed—in conjunction with hand activity, forceful exertions, awkward postures, cold temperatures, and other factors such as rotation participation and pattern—affects the risk of both musculoskeletal disorders and injuries among workers."⁴

Two further studies from the National Institute for Occupation Safety and Health (NIOSH) confirm these findings. They reported staggeringly high rates of injuries directly related to the rapid, repetitive

¹ <http://www.nelp.org/content/uploads/OSHA-Severe-Injury-Data-2015-2016.pdf>. See also <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/676796.pdf>

² See <https://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/osh/os/ostb4358.pdf>.

³ See, for instance, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23996875>, and <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22258161>.

⁴ See GAO report, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/676796.pdf>.

motions. In one study, 34 percent of workers had carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS), and 76 percent had evidence of nerve damage in their hands and wrists.⁵ In another study, 42 percent had CTS.⁶ These numbers are not an unhappy coincidence. As NIOSH's agency director stated, "Line speed affects the periodicity of repetitive and forceful movements, which are key causes of musculoskeletal disorders."⁷ In other words, the faster the line speed, the greater the risk of harm.

It's also clear that the line speed in poultry plants may pose dangers to consumers. OSHA citations show that workers are denied breaks, including breaks to use the restroom, in order to keep lines going at full speed. Many workers end up soiling themselves while standing on the processing line; this poses an obvious danger of contamination.

While Congressman Collins and others refer to higher line speeds in other countries, evidence points to clear problems. Germany allows line speeds up to 200 bpm in poultry plants; the country also experiences particularly high levels of Salmonella and Campylobacter contamination in poultry meats, which is largely attributed to the slaughter process.⁸

In a recent statement, Congressman Collins referenced positive results arising from pilot programs allowing line speeds to be raised from 140 to 175 bpm. No such outcomes can be found. In fact, the GAO strongly criticized the USDA for the lack of credible evidence emerging from the pilot program to support its claims that higher line speeds were safe for workers and consumers.⁹ Furthermore, data from the pilot programs found an average line speed of 131 bpm, far below the 175 permitted. And even with the 131 bpm line speed, the USDA recognized the dangers of higher line speeds to workers and noted that more studies would be needed before any increases be made.¹⁰

It should also be pointed out that USDA researchers have found that the regulatory pathogen testing results in the pilot plants may have been skewed as the antimicrobial chemicals used in those plants probably overpowered the collection broth used by inspectors to collect samples. That may have led to the reporting of false negative results, understating the actual level of pathogens in the poultry. Consequently, USDA developed and began using a stronger neutralizing agent in its pathogen sampling program in 2016.¹¹ Any food safety arguments made to increase line speeds using the track record of the pilot plants need to be viewed skeptically.

Finally, Congressman Collins argues that increasing line speeds is necessary to compete with German and Belgian factories, which operate line speeds of 200 bpm or more. However, Germany and Belgium are not permitted to export their poultry to the United States,¹² so their industry standards have no impact in the U.S. market. Furthermore, as noted above, the poultry found in these foreign plants still has high levels of pathogens that continue to be of concern to European food safety officials.

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/reports/pdfs/2014-0040-3232.pdf>.

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/reports/pdfs/2012-0125-3204.pdf>.

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/poultry/pdfs/letterapril72014.pdf>

⁸ See

http://www.bfr.bund.de/en/press_information/2015/10/pathogens_in_food_improvements_required_to_protect_against_campylobacter_ehec_and_listeria-193815.html

⁹ <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/657144.pdf>

¹⁰ See <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/00ffa106-f373-437a-9cf3-6417f289bfc2/2011-0012F.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>

¹¹ See <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-fy16-tech-transfer-report.pdf>, p.165.

¹² 9 CFR 381.196

In short, we urge you to reject any calls to increase poultry line speeds. The overwhelming evidence to date suggests this increase would have disastrous results. Until the USDA completes its studies evaluating the safety of existing poultry plant line speeds, no changes in standards should be proposed or made. Any move by the USDA to increase line speeds in poultry plants would be in complete disregard to the safety of the 250,000 working men and women who endure already exceedingly harsh working conditions to feed their fellow Americans.

Sincerely,

A Better Balance

American Public Health Association, Occupational Health & Safety Section

Beyond OSHA Project

Brazos Interfaith Immigration Network/Centro de Derechos Laborales

Center for Science in the Public Interest

Communications Workers of America

Conquista Interpreter Services

Department of Public Health, UMass Lowell

Economic Policy Institute

Fe y Justicia Worker Center

Food & Water Watch

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

Interfaith Worker Justice

International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Knox Area Workers' Memorial Day Committee

Knoxville, Oak Ridge Area Central Labor Council

KOL Foods

NAACP

National Council for Occupational Safety and Health

National Employment Law Project

Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest

New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy

NH Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health

Occupational Health Clinical Centers

OEM consultant

Oxfam America

Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health (PhilaPOSH)

Presbyterian Church (USA) Washington Office of Public Witness

Public Citizen

Public Justice Center

SafeWork Washington

Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

Sciencecorps

South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice

Southern Poverty Law Center

UFCW

UnidosUS (formerly NCLR)

Western North Carolina Workers' Center

WisCOSH, Inc.

Worksafe