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“A System Rued: Inspecting Food” Opening Statement March 30, 2004

Two years ago, the federal government saw its largest re-organization since the end of World War II with the creation of the Homeland Security Department, which involved the merger of 22 existing agencies and 180,000 employees into one mammoth Cabinet department.

Today, this Subcommittee begins its examination of how the rest of the government is structured, and whether the existing structure needs re-organization on a much smaller scale. We begin this process by focusing on one aspect of the federal government that touches our everyday life – how the government inspects food.

Right now, there are more than a dozen federal agencies that enforce more than 35 food safety laws - creating such illogical situations as the Food and Drug Administration having responsibility for inspecting closed-face meat sandwiches, while the U.S. Department of Agriculture is in charge of inspecting open-face meat sandwiches. Or, if you prefer, the FDA is in charge of cheese pizzas while the USDA has jurisdiction over pepperoni pizzas. And here's one more: FDA inspects both beef soup and chicken broth – but USDA inspects chicken soup and beef broth.

As the old saying goes, you can't make this stuff up.

This situation did not happen overnight, but is the result of piecemeal legislative solutions crafted over the years. It is a good example of why, every once in a while, Congress needs to take a step back and look at the whole picture, to see if there is some re-arranging that should take place. In this instance, one possible solution that some have raised is to consolidate all the food inspection programs under a single agency. We are going to hear testimony today on that subject, as well as the other organizational issues facing food inspection programs.

Regardless of the organizational ideas offered today, I would emphasize at the outset that everyone in this room is in agreement that we want our food supply to be safe, so that is not an issue.

I thank our witnesses for being here, and I look forward to the discussion.

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