

February 8, 2021

Janet Woodcock, M.D.
Acting Commissioner
Food and Drug Administration
10903 New Hampshire Ave
Silver Spring, MD 20993-0002

Norris Cochran
Acting Secretary
US Department of Health and Human
Services
200 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Kevin Shea
Acting Secretary
US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Maria Pagan
Acting US Trade Representative
600 17th St, NW
Washington, DC 20006

<<Sent Via Electronic Mail>>

Dear U.S. Government Officials:

As representatives of the food and beverage critical infrastructure, we request a meeting to discuss our concerns that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) may shift their scientific conclusions that consumers cannot contract COVID-19 by eating foods or handling food packaging, thereby allowing a narrative that is not supported by credible science.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), peer global regulatory bodies, and leading food safety experts, agree that there is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with eating food or handling food packaging. No known illnesses have been associated with foodborne COVID-19. The facts are simple -- COVID-19 is a respiratory disease, not a foodborne one.

Recent reports suggest that the WHO is considering modifying its science conclusions about COVID-19 transmission, to imply that there is a possibility that contaminated food or food packaging can be a plausible source of viral transmission. Reports suggest that they base a possible revision of their advice on China's assertion that clusters of COVID-19 illnesses were caused through handling of imported foods. Two important contentions need to be considered: (1) none of the SARS-CoV-2 detection methods used for foods and food packaging have been scientifically validated and (2) these viral detection methods cannot distinguish between infectious and non-infectious virus. Taken together, interpretation of results and potential risk of transmission and human infection from these sources is not scientifically proven. Prior to making any modifications to its current position, we urge the U.S. government to recommend that the WHO commission a panel of objective and independent virus experts to review the evidence presented by the Chinese government.

The WHO and the World Trade Organization (WTO) acceptance of the Chinese claims that COVID-19 can be a foodborne disease, would be a dangerous departure from the scientific consensus and would undermine the credibility of these global organizations. It would also create challenges for the reputation of U.S.-produced foods by fostering misunderstanding among consumers at a critical moment when clarity is needed most. Further, such departure from science would undermine the tremendous efforts of all food workers to ensure a safe food system by diverting limited resources to address very remote risks instead of investing in mitigation strategies that reduce the very high risk of person-to-person transmission by respiratory droplets. American food processors and handlers take great pride in their adherence to good manufacturing practices and the highest quality food safety practices to ensure the foods we manufacture meet all U.S. regulatory and food safety requirements. Thus, the U.S. enjoys the safest food supply in the world.

Thank you for your consideration and we appreciate your support of the nation's food and beverage industry.

Sincerely,

American Bakers Association
Association for Dressings & Sauces
American Frozen Food Institute
Consumer Brands Association
Corn Refiners Association
Food Industry Association (FMI)
Global Cold Chain Alliance
Juice Products Association
International Flight Services Association
International Food Additive Council
Institute of Shortening and Edible Oils
National Fisheries Institute
National Grocers Association
National Peanut and Treenut Processors Association
National Seasoning Manufacturers Association
North American Meat Association
North American Millers Association
Produce Marketing Association
The Vinegar Institute
Western Growers Association

cc:

Frank Yiannas, Deputy Commissioner for Food Policy and Response, FDA
Don Prater, Associate Commissioner for Imported Food Safety, FDA
Paul Kiecker, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety, USDA
Jason Hafemeister, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Trade and Foreign
Agricultural Affairs, USDA
Julie Callahan, Assistant US Trade Representative

Colin McIff, Acting Director, Office of Global Affairs, HHS

Mara Burr, Director of Multilateral Relations, Office of Global Affairs at HHS