

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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RADIO ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT
TO THE NATION

The Roosevelt Room

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. Today, I'm pleased to announce a major new step toward protecting the health and safety of all Americans, especially our children.

Almost a week ago, in my inaugural address, I told the American people that we must lead our country into the 21st century with the American Dream alive for all our children; with the American promise of a more perfect union a reality for all our people; with the light of our freedom illuminating all the world.

I believe we will make this vision real by doing what we've always done in moments of great change -- holding fast to our enduring values. Central among these is the belief that we work tirelessly to make our families stronger and our children safer. Nothing is more important to meeting this goal than seeing to it that Americans live in a world with clean air, safe food, pure water. Hard-working American parents deserve the peace of mind that comes from knowing that the meal they set before their children is safe.

That's why I was so concerned by what happened in Washington State and in two other Western states this fall. Apple juice contaminated with a deadly strain of E Coli bacteria reached supermarket shelves. More than a dozen children, some as young as two, were hospitalized, and one child died.

I'm sure just about every parent in America remembers what E Coli can do. Four years ago this month, tragedy struck hundreds of families in the Western United States when they took their children to fast-food restaurants that served them hamburgers tainted by the E Coli bacteria. Five hundred people became ill, some of them severely, and four children lost their lives.

Our administration has made it a top priority to protect the health and safety of all Americans. I signed into law legislation to keep harmful pesticides off our fruits and vegetables and legislation that keeps our drinking water safe and pure. We put in place strong new protections to ensure that seafood is safe. And last summer we announced steps to modernize our meat and poultry food and safety system for the first time in 90 years. These new safety rules will begin to take effect next week. From now on, all meat and poultry plants will be required to test for E Coli.

We have built a solid foundation for the health of America's families. But clearly we must do more. No parent should have to think twice about the juice that they pour their children at breakfast, or a hamburger ordered during dinner out. That's why, today, I'm announcing new steps to use cutting-edge technology to keep our food safe and to protect our children from deadly bacteria.

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We must continue to modernize the food safety system put in place at the dawn of the 20th century so that it can meet the demands of the 21st century.

First, we will put in place a nationwide early warning system for food-borne illness. Right now the Centers for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration and the Agriculture Department sponsor five centers across the country whose mission is to post a lookout for food-borne diseases like E Coli bacteria and Salmonella. Working with state and local governments, these sentinel sites in California, Oregon, Minnesota, Georgia and Connecticut, actively track outbreaks of illnesses caused by contaminated food. Today I'm announcing we'll increase the number of these sites from five to eight, and link them to other state health agencies.

This expanded early warning system will enable us to catch outbreaks sooner and give us the data we need to help us prevent outbreaks from happening in the first place.

Second, we will see to it that the early warning system uses state-of-the-art technology to keep our food safe. We'll increase the number of expert disease detectives to investigate and control food-borne disease outbreaks. We will give these experts the technology to use sophisticated new DNA finger-printing methods to trace dangerous bacteria to their source. We will create a permanent DNA fingerprint library so we can immediately recognize an illness if it reappears. And we will use advance communication networks to speed outbreak information to hospitals and public health agencies all around America.

Third, I'm directing Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, Secretary of Health and Human Service Donna Shalala and the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency Carol Browner to work with communities, farmers, businesses, consumer protection groups and all levels of government to come up with additional measures to improve food safety. I want them to pay special attention to research and public education efforts. I want them to focus on what sort of partnerships the government can form with the private sector to meet our goals. And I want them to report back to me with their findings within 90 days.

Finally, let me add that these new public health investments are paid for, line by line, dime by dime, in the balanced budget I will officially send to Congress next month. With this new early warning system to track food-borne illness, we are saying loud and clear that we will use the world's best science to make the world's most bountiful food supply safer than ever before, for our families and for our children. Together we will see to it that our people and our nation are prepared for the 21st century.

Thanks for listening.

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