Consumer groups cry foul on proposed poultry regs

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A proposed change in the way poultry is inspected has industry critics crying foul.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed a reduction in the number of federal inspectors posted at poultry plants and in the amount of time dedicated to inspecting each bird, offering individual companies to self-police their lines.

According to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the proposed regulation would pull all but one federal inspector off the line, requiring them to examine three birds per second. Currently, as many as four federal inspectors are posted along the conveyor belt.

So is this good or bad? Reporter Tim Eberly puts it this way:

The U.S. Department of Agriculture says its proposal is a win-win-win that modernizes food inspection while saving money for taxpayers and the poultry industry.

The nation's most recognized food safety and consumer groups, however, say the plan would leave gaping holes in oversight that will endanger the nation's food supply, not to mention create a conflict of interest for poultry plants. They warn that Americans, who eat about 80 pounds of poultry a year, will be at greater risk of getting a side serving of fecal contamination or cancerous tumors with their chicken. ...

The government says the changes will save taxpayers more than $90 million over three years. But the big winner will be the poultry industry, which will save at least $256 million a year in production costs, the USDA has projected.

Pilot programs testing the proposal have been around since 1999. According to the Food Safety Inspection Service, plants in the pilot programs have reduced the rate of fecal contamination. But some call into question the reliability of that documentation.

Stan Painter, an inspector at one of those pilot programs, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, "There's no humanly way you can keep up (with the faster line speeds)."

"They're going by in a blur," he said.

With fewer inspectors on the line, it is down to the industry to self-regulate. Ashley Peterson with the National Chicken Council reassured Eberly that the industry would be sure to remove any defective birds.

But not everyone buys that statement, David Barrett among them. He worked at a poultry plant when he was younger and now is a federal inspector. "They (plant supervisors) don't like it when we
slow the lines down," Barrett told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “You think they’re going to allow their own people to do it?”

What do you think? Should the USDA turn over safety inspections at chicken plants to companies? Click the link above to share your thoughts and become part of the Harvest Network.