

# The Food Safety Educator

Volume 10, No. 1, 2005

## ■ New Tools

This issue of *The Food Safety Educator* is dedicated to electronic services and other items FSIS rolled out in 2004. Featured are “Ask Karen” (page 2) and a new FSIS Web site (page 4).

In the center, you'll also find a

pull-out section that reports on the activities of the USDA Food Safety Mobile last year.

You can read about changes in *The Food Safety Educator*, including our staff, Web page, and content. As always, we welcome your input. ●

## Best Wishes, Dianne

As *The Food Safety Educator* goes into its 10th year of bringing you news and information, we are saying “Good-bye and best wishes” to its editor, Dianne Durant, as she retires from the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service.

Dianne worked on the newsletter since its launch in 1996, bringing it to more than 12,000 subscribers in 2004. She has covered topics from the unveiling of the “Safe Handling Instructions” label to irradiation of ground beef, use of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) for Federal inspections and consumer training, conferences, Internet resources, social marketing, and the creation of Fight BAC!® and Thermy™.

The Food Safety Education Staff wishes Dianne the best of luck and much enjoyment in her retirement.

We'll miss you! ●

## Food Safety Mobile Recap



The center spread of this issue is a report of 2004 Food Safety Mobile activities. The Mobile participated in the Albuquerque, NM, International Balloon Fiesta in October 2004.

# ■ A Food Safety Educator Is “Born”

By Tangela Allen and Laura Reiser

As Athena sprang forth from the head of Zeus fully grown and in full armor, ready for victory, and full of wisdom, on April 20, 2004, “Ask Karen” was launched onto the Food Safety and Inspection Service’s (FSIS) Web site, ready to overcome foodborne illness by answering the public’s food safety questions.

As a virtual representative (vRep), the “Ask Karen” tool sprang forth from many heads—technical information specialists from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Meat and Poultry Hotline, public affairs specialists, and Web developers. They provided the vRep “wisdom” by populating its database with answers to anticipated questions. The team armed the vRep with speed and flexibility by giving it an interactive ability such that users can type in a food safety question and get an almost instantaneous answer or referral. By using the Web as its venue, the vRep team made “Ask Karen” available to users anytime, anywhere. When users go to the FSIS home page ([www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)) and click on the link “Ask a Food Safety Question,” they meet “Ask Karen.”

## Virtual and “Personal”

A vRep is an automated information source designed to display answers to questions which consumers can ask about a set of topics. The topics for “Ask Karen” are food safety, food inspection, food storage and preparation, food recalls, and other topics related to meat, poultry, and egg products. The responses given by “Karen” contain specific answers to questions along with optional Web sites and links that will answer each question in detail.

The automated response system provides streamlined information and data that make getting questions

I Want To...

- [Ask a Food Safety Question](#)
- Local
- Find Info
- Sub
- Visit Safe
- Watch Ann
- Att
- Expe Poul
- View

## Food Safety Education

### Ask Karen

I'm Karen, the FSIS Virtual Representative. I can answer your food safety questions.

I am trained to answer questions about the prevention of foodborne illness, as well as the safe storage, preparation, and handling of meat, poultry and egg products.

**Please type your question below.**

[Ask](#) [Help](#)

When visitors to the FSIS home page click on “Ask a Food Safety Question,” they go directly to the “Ask Karen” page, where they can enter their food safety questions.

answered easier for consumers. This differs from a search engine, which returns every reference to the topic available on the FSIS Web site. With “Ask Karen,” consumers receive their responses from a database, which contains safe food-handling procedures for consumers and consumer food safety education information.

The vRep is designed to enhance the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline by providing consumers 24/7 access to more than 20 years of safe food-handling knowledge assembled by the Hotline staff. With “Ask Karen,” consumers just type in a question at their convenience. It doesn't matter if it's 2:00 in the afternoon or 2:00 in the morning.

Once a consumer types a question into the designated box on the “Ask Karen” Web page, the tool returns

a response from the database. Responses may also include a link where the consumer can find more information.

If the user isn't sure of the question or just wants to explore the “wisdom” of “Ask Karen,” there is another option. The “Help” button leads the consumer to “Question Categories.” The consumer can type one of these categories in the question box, then the vRep will display the current list of example questions in the category.

## Learn Something New Every Day

If “Karen” doesn't understand the question, the vRep offers suggestions of alternative questions or refers the consumer to the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline. The tool works best with simply stated questions; long explanations are not needed for the

tool to retrieve an answer.

The vRep “learns” to answer new questions or provide better answers based on the questions asked and terms used by visitors. The system records each question and response that is given. Reports of this data are monitored and analyzed by vRep team members on a daily basis. After careful analysis, the questions that are answered incorrectly or that may pertain to other government agencies are assigned the correct response. In most cases, the consumers’ variations on questions are simply added into the tool. Unfamiliar or new terms are programmed into the vRep’s

pattern lists or synonyms to allow the database to search for the correct response.

The timeframe to put together an answer can vary from a few minutes to a few days. While 85 to 90 percent of the answers can be found within FSIS factsheets and other FSIS publications, there are questions that must be referred to other FSIS divisions to determine and develop the correct response. All responses that are entered into the database must meet FSIS requirements and guidelines from a scientific point of view. This is to ensure that consumers are getting the most up-to-date

information for the proper handling and storage of meat, poultry, and egg products.

The vRep team of seven food safety specialists and public affairs specialists began its work in January 2004, compiling information and data collected from more than 20 years of research, knowledge, and training from the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline. By the end of 2004, “Ask Karen” contained more than 1,200 main questions and more than 5,500 variations on these questions. The database contained 121 categories relating to meat, poultry, and egg products safe handling, food storage, food preparation, food inspection, food recalls, and many other topics. The tool’s accuracy is very high—higher than the developers expected to achieve in less than a year.

## Food Safety Education

### Ask Karen



I’m Karen, the FSIS Virtual Representative. I can answer your food safety questions.

I am trained to answer questions about the prevention of foodborne illness, as well as the safe storage, preparation, and handling of meat, poultry and egg products.

**Please type your question below.**

How can I keep leftovers safe?

Ask

Help

Bacteria begin to multiply rapidly in the danger zone between 40 °F (recommended refrigerator temperature) and 140 °F. Therefore, food left out at room temperature will become unsafe in a matter of hours. Refrigerate leftovers at 40 °F or below or freeze (0 °F) as soon as possible, but never leave food out more than 2 hours, or 1 hour if the outside temperature is above 90 °F. Divide leftovers into shallow containers. This encourages rapid, even cooling. Cover with airtight lids or enclose in plastic wraps or aluminum foil. Use refrigerated leftovers within 3 to 4 days, or freeze them for longer storage. For more information, select “Help” above or call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854).

### A Model Educator

Although still a toddler on the Internet, “Ask Karen” has already answered thousands of questions. In just the first year, more than 14,000 visitors asked 44,000 questions.

“Ask Karen” was listed as one of the Government’s “Best Practices” on the new “Federal Web Content Managers Toolkit: A Practical Guide for Managing U.S. Federal Public Websites” ([www.webcontent.gov/req2d4.shtml](http://www.webcontent.gov/req2d4.shtml)). Through this and other venues, “Ask Karen” is used by other government agencies as a model of how to assist the public with finding answers to questions and to help identify with the needs of the public.

In the future, the system may be broadened to contain information from all of the FSIS divisions to assist educators, food service workers, and other visitors to the FSIS Web site who need more technical food safety information.

Ready to test “Karen’s” knowledge? Go directly to “Ask Karen” at [www.fsis.usda.gov/food\\_safety\\_education/ask\\_karen/](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/food_safety_education/ask_karen/)

After visitors type in their questions and click “Ask,” the tool returns an answer and information on how to find out more.



# FSIS Puts on a New Face in Cyberspace

By Jason Waggoner

On April 20, 2004, FSIS launched its new Web site, featuring consistent navigation across the entire site. It is much easier for users to work their way through desired content and more easily retrace their steps. Internet users visit the site because they want food safety information. Usage statistics show that more than half of visitors do not enter the Web site through the “front door,” so they require a site that enables them to quickly find desired content from any page. Visitors to the FSIS Web site will notice that the Agency gave the site a fresh new design that greatly improves navigation and usability, allowing the user to more easily get to the main content areas.

“As a public health agency, it is our goal to empower consumers with knowledge as we continue to drive down the incidence of foodborne illness in America,” said FSIS Acting Administrator Dr. Barbara Masters. “This Web site gives consumers immediate access to the information that will help them protect themselves and their families.”

Consumers definitely go to the Web for information from the government. Approximately 58 percent of American Internet users, or 68 million adults, have visited at least one government Web site, and most have visited more than one, according to PewInternet.org (January 2002). Internet usage in the United States continues to rise, meaning that the general public increasingly turns to online resources.

The new design also makes Spanish language navigation on the site easier. In one click, visitors can get from the home page to a dedicated area with information in Spanish by using the “En Español” button. Studies show the average Hispanic computer user spends more than half of his or her online time with Spanish language

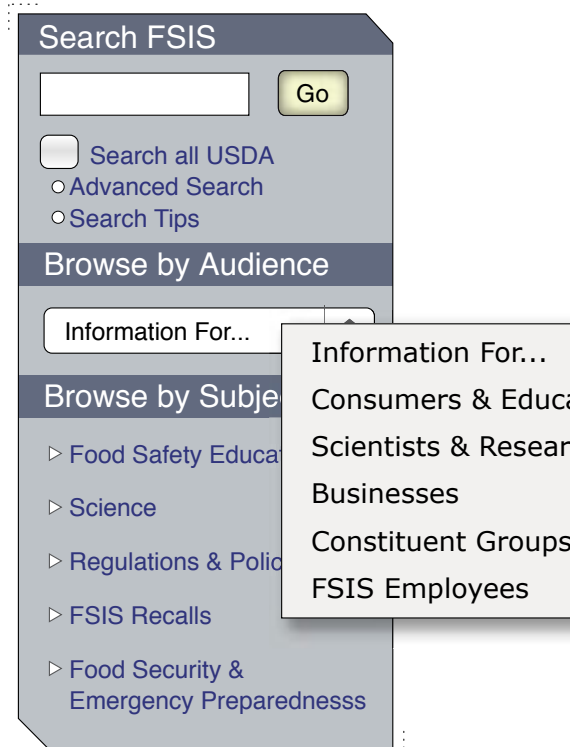


The new FSIS home page features three ways to get information: by subject, by audience, or by the action users want to perform.

resources. To meet that need, FSIS added more informational materials in Spanish.

FSIS gives all its users three new ways to find information: by activity, by audience, and by subject. The “I Want To ...” navigation area on the right side of the main pages allows the user to access the most popular Web actions and tasks in a single click. For example, this area includes the “Visit the USDA Food Safety Mobile” option. This link takes the viewer to the main Mobile page, where the user can see a video on the Mobile, get background information, look at the schedule, and request a Mobile visit in the user's State.

With the “Browse by Subject” option, users can find the areas that most interest them with a single click.



This left-hand navigation area lists information by five major subject groupings, including “Food Safety Education,” “Science,” and “FSIS Recalls.”

With the “Browse by Audience” option, users can find information assembled and organized specifically for them by clicking on the drop-down box and selecting the appropriate designation. The site then takes the user to a main page containing specific information geared toward a particular audience. These audiences include “Consumers & Educators,” “Businesses,” and “Scientists & Researchers.”

In the area of food safety education, both the “Consumers and Educators” (by audience) and the “Food Safety Education” pages (by subject) give the user a variety of options to explore.

In addition to navigation changes, FSIS’s Web staff will regularly update the front page of the new site to reflect current news, Agency initiatives, and seasonal features to give it a continuously fresh look.

Statistics show the site redesign has been well received. As of March 2005, the number of people visiting the site had increased by more than 250 percent since the launch. Overall customer satisfaction and the number of people recommending the site have

also increased significantly, according to the FSIS online customer satisfaction survey.

The FSIS site redesign was part of an aggressive program to enhance USDA’s electronic government capabilities as part of the President’s Management Agenda. The USDA Web Presence initiative began with a new design of USDA’s home page in January 2004 as a first step to upgrade its services and be more responsive to customers' needs. FSIS is the first USDA agency to redesign its Web site under the new Departmental standards.

Watch for a Google-powered search engine on the site in 2005. ●

- I Want To...
- Ask a Food Safety Question
  - Locate an FSIS Office
  - Find FSIS Employee Information
  - Subscribe to Newsletters
  - Visit the USDA Food Safety Mobile
  - Watch a Public Announcement
  - Attend a Public Event
  - Export or Import Poultry or Eggs
  - View Archived Information

You are here: Home / Food Safety Education / Food Safety Education Programs / Food Safety Mobile



While visiting the USDA Food Safety Mobile page, users can find out how to become a host and watch a video. Visitors can easily navigate to other pages with the right-hand menu options. If the visitor entered the FSIS Web site here, the "breadcrumb trail" at the top provides a quick way to identify this page's location.

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chers



## New Materials

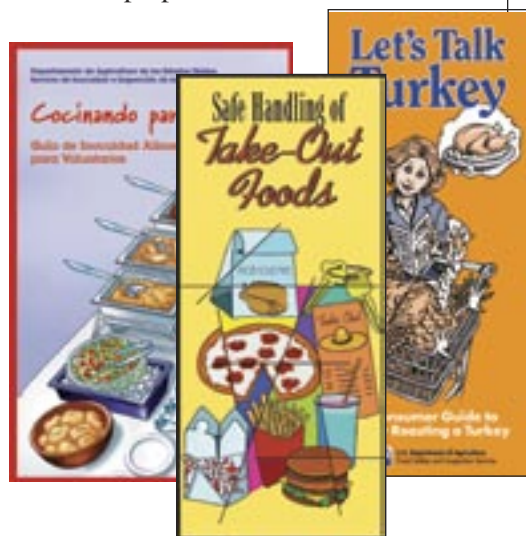
In late 2003 and throughout 2004, FSIS issued some traditional materials you can use and, of course, they are available on the FSIS Web site.

- *Conference Proceedings, Thinking Globally—Working Locally: A Conference on Food Safety Education*
- “Food Safety and Food Security: What Consumers Need to Know”
- Food safety facts with visual cultural motifs to attract the attention of Native Americans and African-Americans
- “Let’s Talk Turkey” all-in-one brochure that answers the most common questions about preparing and handling turkey
- “Protect Your Baby and Yourself From Listeriosis” plain-language factsheet in English and Spanish
- “Safe Handling of Take-Out Foods”
- *Talking About Disaster: Guide for Standard Messages* by the

National Disaster Education Coalition, of which FSIS is a member. The guide is designed to assist those who provide disaster safety information to the general public.

Translated into Spanish

- “Cooking for Groups” color booklet especially for volunteer food preparers. ●



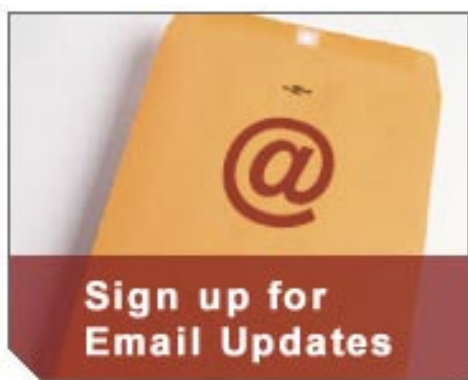
## More Changes on the Web

### Get the Scoop on Updates

Get the most current information from the FSIS Web site by signing up for E-mail updates. Customers may sign up for 21 initial subscription options across 8 categories to find out when pages have been revised.

Options range from recalls to export information to FSIS issuances such as regulations, directives, and notices. News releases and *The Food Safety Educator* are also available. FSIS will send you an E-mail when the pages you chose are updated.

From September 2004 to April 2005, more than 11,000 visitors to the site subscribed to the service, which averages 50 new subscribers each day. Sign up on the FSIS Web site at [www.fsis.usda.gov/News\\_&\\_Events/Email\\_Subscription/](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/News_&_Events/Email_Subscription/) ●



### Web Address Changes

*The Food Safety Educator* Web page address has changed. Be sure to update your bookmarks.

### *The Food Safety Educator*

[http://www.fsis.usda.gov/News\\_&\\_Events/food\\_safety\\_educator/](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/News_&_Events/food_safety_educator/) ●

## Editorial Notes

Dear Educator,

I'm very pleased to be the new editor of *The Food Safety Educator*. The tagline for the Educator has always been, "Your consumer education connection." Our goal is to make that the focus of the publication. Other publications and news sources such as the e-newsletter "EdNet" will continue to cover news about food safety science and education for industry and food service.

Features and topics planned for the *Educator* in 2005 include:

- List of new publications, materials, curricula, and other educational tools for consumers and consumer educators from USDA and its partners;
- Tips on using the media to educate consumers;
- News on social marketing efforts and developments;
- News on conferences and training;
- Articles from your peers about their successes in grass-roots education and behavior change (send us your ideas);
- Information on how to leverage partnerships to enhance your programs; and
- New technologies and methodologies you can use in consumer education and behavior change.

Do you think something is missing from this list? Do you have a success story or a valuable experience to share with others interested in educating consumers about food safety? Please send your ideas and comments to me at [editor.foodsafetyeducator@fsis.usda.gov](mailto:editor.foodsafetyeducator@fsis.usda.gov), fax to (301) 504-0204, or mail to our address on the back page. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

*Laura S. Reiser*

Editor

# How To Keep in Touch With Food Safety Education Information

## The Food Safety Educator

This free newsletter reports on food safety educational programs and materials. It is distributed to more than 12,000 educators throughout the country, including public health offices, extension educators, industry, and consumer groups.

To subscribe: provide your name, organization, and mailing address.

- Write to USDA/FSIS/FSES, Mail Stop 5268, 5601 Sunnyside Ave., Beltsville, MD 20705, or

- Fax your request to (301) 504-0204, or

- E-mail your request to [fsis.outreach@usda.gov](mailto:fsis.outreach@usda.gov)

The newsletter is also available on the FSIS Web site: [www.fsis.usda.gov/News\\_&\\_Events/food\\_safety\\_educator/](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/News_&_Events/food_safety_educator/)

Sign up there to find out by E-mail when new editions are posted to the FSIS Web site.

## More on the Web

USDA/Food Safety and Inspection Service: [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)

Thermy™ Web page: [www.fsis.usda.gov/thermy/](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/thermy/)

Fight BAC!®: [www.fightbac.org](http://www.fightbac.org)

Gateway to Government Food Safety Info: [www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov)

FDA/Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition: [www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/foodsafety](http://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety)



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**Please E-mail comments and suggestions to us at [fsis.outreach@usda.gov](mailto:fsis.outreach@usda.gov)**

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## Other Resources

EdNet: a monthly electronic newsletter for food safety educators. To subscribe, send an E-mail message to [Listserv@foodsafety.gov](mailto:Listserv@foodsafety.gov). Send the message: Subscribe EDNET-L firstname lastname

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline: call toll-free 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854), for the hearing-impaired (TTY) 1-800-256-7072

Food and Drug Administration's Outreach and Information Center: Call toll-free 1-888-SAFEFOOD