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Pew-commissioned Poll Finds Nine in Ten Iowa Voters Support More Government Oversight of Food

Des Moines, IA -- Ninety percent of voting Iowans believe the government should be given additional authority to ensure the food they eat does not make them sick, according to a new poll commissioned by The Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted by Hart Research and Public Opinion Strategies.

Support for stronger food protections is high regardless of voters' gender, income level or political affiliation. The statewide survey of 511 registered voters, conducted between August 10-12, 2009, has a margin of error of +/- 4.3 percent. Full survey results are available at www.MakeOurFoodSafe.org.

The overall support for new safety measures follows high-profile outbreaks in recent years in which pathogens in peanut butter, pistachios, peppers, spinach and other food resulted in illnesses in people across the country – including deaths of a number of children and elderly citizens. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 76 million food-related illnesses occur annually in the United States, with 325,000 people hospitalized and 5,000 dying as a result.

The survey shows that about half (49 percent) of Iowa voters say what they have seen and heard in the last year has made them less confident in the safety of food sold in the United States. In addition, more than half (55 percent) of all seniors have a decrease in confidence.

“Most foodborne illnesses that result in hospitalizations and death are preventable. Despite that, one American every two hours, every day of the year perishes as a result of pathogens in the food they eat,” says Shelley A. Hearne, managing director of the Pew Health Group. “The Food and Drug Administration, which is responsible for the safety of over 80 percent of the foods we eat, does not have the tools or resources it needs to sufficiently protect the public from dangers in the food supply.”

A total 81 percent of Iowa voters interviewed believe the federal government should be responsible for ensuring that food is safe to eat, and more than half (53 percent) believe the federal government is doing too little to ensure that imported food is safe from contamination. The FDA is equipped to inspect less than one percent of the imported products it regulates, according to agency officials.

Release of the survey comes as the Senate is expected to consider food safety legislation that gives the FDA new oversight and enforcement powers. The House passed its version of the bill in July, which includes stronger inspection authorities for federal officials when investigating domestic facilities and imports.

“Iowans are very clear: the government needs to do more to ensure that our family members won't get sick from the food on their dinner plates,” says Hearne. “The take-away message from this it is that the public gets it: our antiquated food safety laws greatly need updating so that Americans can have more confidence in the food supply.”

Based on research and critical analysis, the Pew Health Group (www.pewtrusts.org/health) seeks to improve the health and well-being of all Americans. It advocates policies that reduce potentially dangerous health risks in consumer, medical and food products and services.

The Pew Charitable Trusts (www.pewtrusts.org) is driven by the power of knowledge to solve today's most challenging problems. Pew applies a rigorous, analytical approach to improve public policy, inform the public and stimulate civic life. We partner with a diverse range of donors, public and private organizations and concerned citizens who share our commitment to fact-based solutions and goal-driven investments to improve society.

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