

FSIS Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS) Complaints Annual Report – Calendar Year (CY) 2015

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Introduction/Background

What is the FSIS Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS)?

The Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS) was established in November 2001 to provide FSIS a centralized system for managing consumer complaints associated with FSIS-regulated meat, poultry, and processed egg products. CCMS and the consumer complaints collected in the system provide an additional data source that supports FSIS’s real-time surveillance and response activities, enables the Agency to identify and investigate reports of potentially unsafe food in commerce, and to evaluate trends over time.

Consumers who want to report an incident to FSIS are encouraged to do so by utilizing the online [Electronic Consumer Complaint Form](#) (eCCF) or by calling the toll-free USDA [Meat and Poultry Hotline](#) at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854).

Complaint Highlights for 2015:

- *In total, 948 complaints were reported to CCMS in 2015. This represents a 5% increase from 2014*
- *Almost half of consumer complaints were reported using the Electronic Consumer Complaint Form (eCCF)*
- *Foreign object was the most common primary complaint type reported in 2015 and all years since 2002*
- *Fully cooked-not shelf stable products and those containing chicken were associated with the most complaints*
- *Illness complaints were associated with the highest number of reported medical visits*

This report summarizes data from the Consumer Complaint Monitoring System for CY 2015.

Complaint Reporting

From 2002 (the first full calendar year of documented consumer complaints in CCMS) through 2015, FSIS received a total of 12,289 consumer complaints in the United States and its territories (Figure 1). The largest number of complaints reported in any given year was 1,258 in 2007. The complaints were a result of multiple high-profile recalls. In the following years, the number of consumer complaints declined steadily until 2012 when FSIS released the Electronic Consumer Complaint Form (eCCF).

More than 80% of consumer complaints are reported to FSIS through one of two reporting methods: the Meat and Poultry Hotline and the Electronic Consumer Complaint Form (eCCF). In September 2012, FSIS released the eCCF, an online reporting form, to enhance consumer complaint reporting options. The eCCF is available 24 hours a day and offers the public, including state and local departments of health and schools, an additional means to report complaints to FSIS.

Between 2012 and 2015, the total number of complaints reported has increased annually. In the same time period, reporting via the eCCF increased while usage of other reporting methods declined. There were 295 (36.9%) complaints reported via eCCF in 2013 (the first full calendar year of eCCF data) and 458 (48.3%) in 2015. The eCCF is now the most common reporting channel utilized by the public for consumer complaints reported to FSIS in 2015 (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Number of Complaints Reported to FSIS Annually, 2002-2015

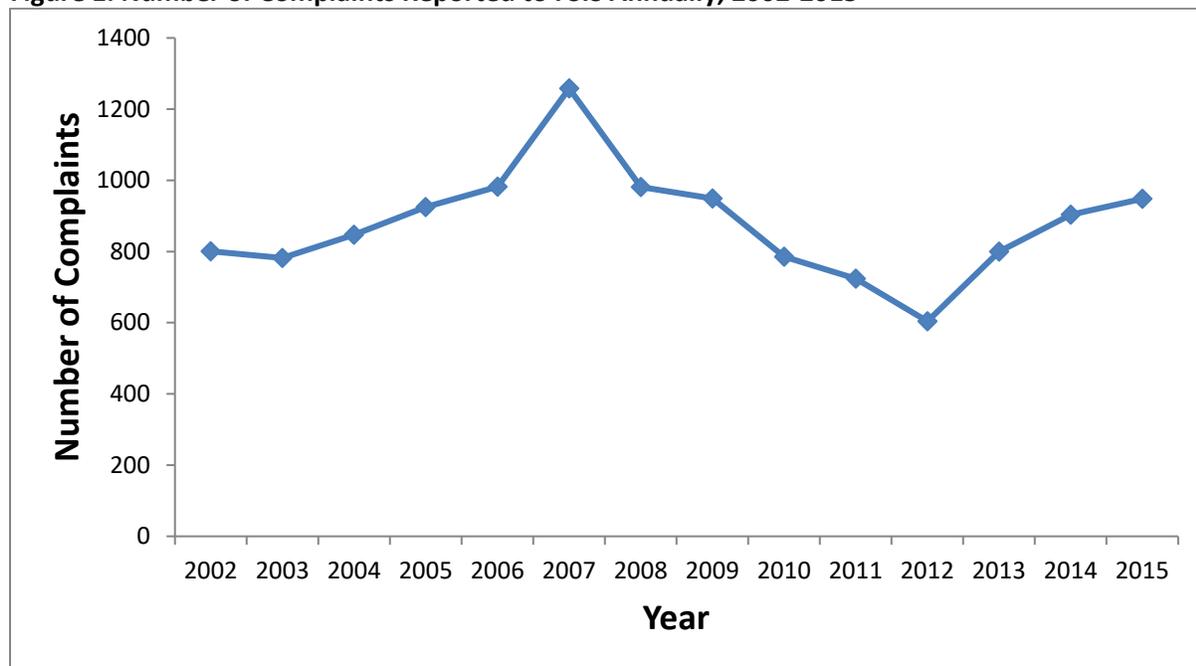
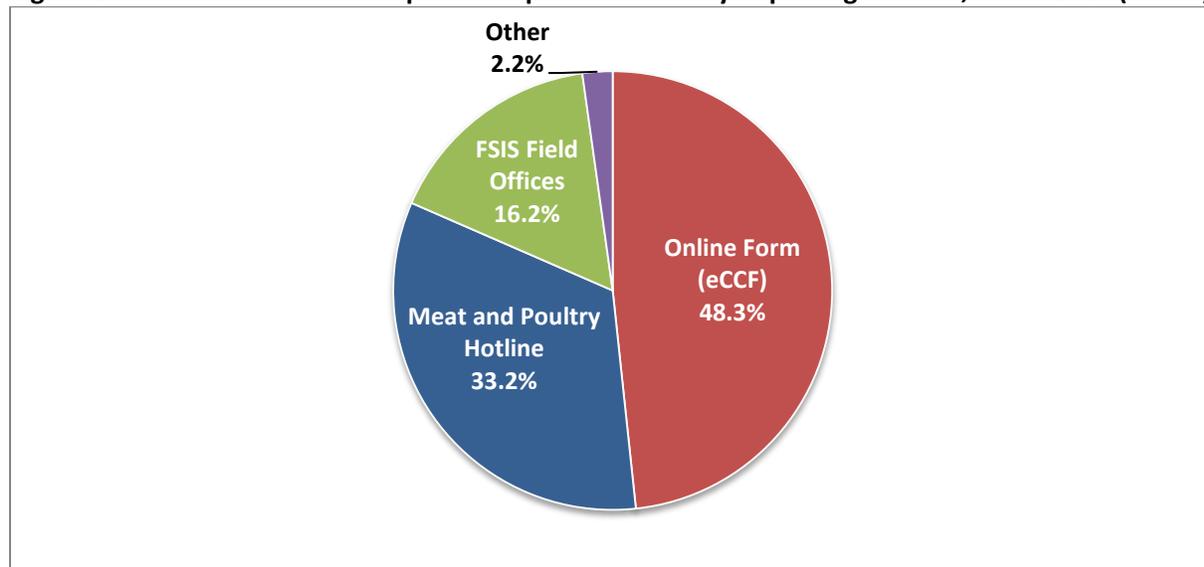


Figure 2. Percent Consumer Complaints Reported to FSIS by Reporting Method, CCMS 2015 (n=948)



[FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline](#)

[FSIS Field Offices](#): OFO – Office of Field Operations and OIEA – Office of Investigation, Audit and Enforcement.

Other: FSIS Office of Public Health Science (OPHS), state and local Health Departments, other federal agencies, etc.

Of the 948 complaints reported to FSIS in 2015, 109 involved food products not regulated by FSIS. Ninety (82.5%) of the complaints involving food products not regulated by FSIS were reported via the eCCF. Complaints involving food products such as fruits, vegetables, and those requiring further preparation at retail locations (e.g. restaurants and delis) were forwarded to the appropriate non-FSIS regulating agency, such as the Food and Drug Administration or state health department, for follow-up.

The need to forward a consumer complaint to another authority may not be identified until an initial evaluation or investigation is completed by FSIS.

When a consumer contacts FSIS to report a complaint, a case is created in CCMS and may be associated with one or more individually counted FSIS-regulated products. In 2015, there were 839 complaints associated with 860 FSIS-regulated products. The remainder of this report will focus on the 839 complaints. Where references are made to 2014, there were 811 complaints which specifically involved FSIS-regulated commodities.

Overall, products containing either chicken (282, 32.8%) or beef (272, 31.6%) commodities comprised over 60% of all complaints reported (Table 1). Almost one-third of the complaints reported were fully cooked-not shelf stable products (Table 2). These are finished products produced using a full lethality heat step (e.g. cooking) and can be eaten without further cooking (e.g. hot dogs).

Table 1. Number and Percent of Complaints per FSIS-Regulated Commodity (n=860), 2015

Commodity	Number	Percent
Chicken	282	32.8%
Beef	272	31.6%
Pork	141	16.4%
Turkey	88	10.2%
Two or More ^a	65	7.5%
Other Meat ^b	10	1.2%
Unknown ^c	2	<1.0%
Egg Products	0	0%

^a“Two or More” identifies products where more than one FSIS-regulated commodity was included in the ingredients of one product, such as a sausage product containing beef and pork.

^b“Other Meat” includes lamb, rabbit, buffalo, venison, goat, or another FSIS-regulated commodity not otherwise listed.

^c“Unknown” indicates that product information provided by the consumer was insufficient to categorize further.

Table 2. Number and Percent of Complaints per Processing Category (n=860), 2015

Processing Category ^a	Number	Percent
Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable	269	31.3%
Raw-Not Ground (Not Intact)	220	25.6%
Raw-Ground (Intact)	143	16.6%
Heat treated-Not Shelf Stable	108	12.6%
Canned/Retorted ^b	73	8.5%
Other ^c	38	4.4%
Unknown ^d	9	1.0%

^aUSDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. FSIS product categorization. Retrieved from:

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/abbf595d-7fc7-4170-b7be-37f812882388/Product-Categorization.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>.

^b“Canned/Retorted”=“Thermally Processed-Commercially Sterile”.

^c“Other” includes “Heat Treated-Shelf Stable” and all other FSIS processing categories not otherwise listed.

^d“Unknown” indicates that product information provided by the consumer was insufficient to categorize further.

Complaint Types

Using information provided by consumers, complaints are carefully reviewed and categorized into one of seven main complaint type categories (Table 3): foreign object, illness, injury, off-quality, mislabeling or misbranded, allergic reaction, and other, non-specific. If a case involves multiple complaint types, it is necessary to capture within the system which complaint is the primary or root cause of the report. An example of this is a complaint of a foreign object leading to an injury. For the purposes of this report, unless otherwise stated, all reference to a specific complaint type refers to the “primary” complaint noted in the case.

Table 3. Description of CCMS Complaint Types

Complaint Type	Description
Foreign Object	The presence of an item(s) in a food or package that is not normally included in the ingredients or packaging, such as a piece of metal or other inedible material.
Illness	A sickness occurring hours to days after consumption of a food and symptoms may commonly include, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.
Injury	The occurrence of personal harm or damage as a result of handling or consuming a food, such as a broken tooth from a foreign object.
Off-Quality	The presence of a color, odor, texture, or taste that is different from what is perceived as normal or expected for the product, such as a food having a chemical smell.
Mislabeling or Misbranded	Labeling or packaging information that is false or misleading for the respective product or product that was not properly produced in an FSIS-regulated facility.
Allergic Reaction	A hypersensitivity reaction usually occurring within minutes to hours after consumption of a food and symptoms may include rash, itching, and difficulty breathing.
Other, Non-Specific	A situation where abnormalities are reported with the packaging of a product or a unique complaint which cannot be categorized as another type of complaint.

In 2015, the most common primary complaint type reported was foreign objects (Figure 3); This has been consistent for all years of CCMS data. Although foreign objects continue to be leading complaint type reported, reports of foreign objects decreased between 2013 and 2015 (Figure 4). Illness (211, 25.1%) and off-quality (190, 22.6%) were the second and third most commonly reported complaints, respectively. Between 2014 and 2015 the percentage of illness complaints increased from 21.2% in 2014 to 25.1% in 2015.

Figure 3. Percent Complaints by Primary Complaint Type (n=839), 2015

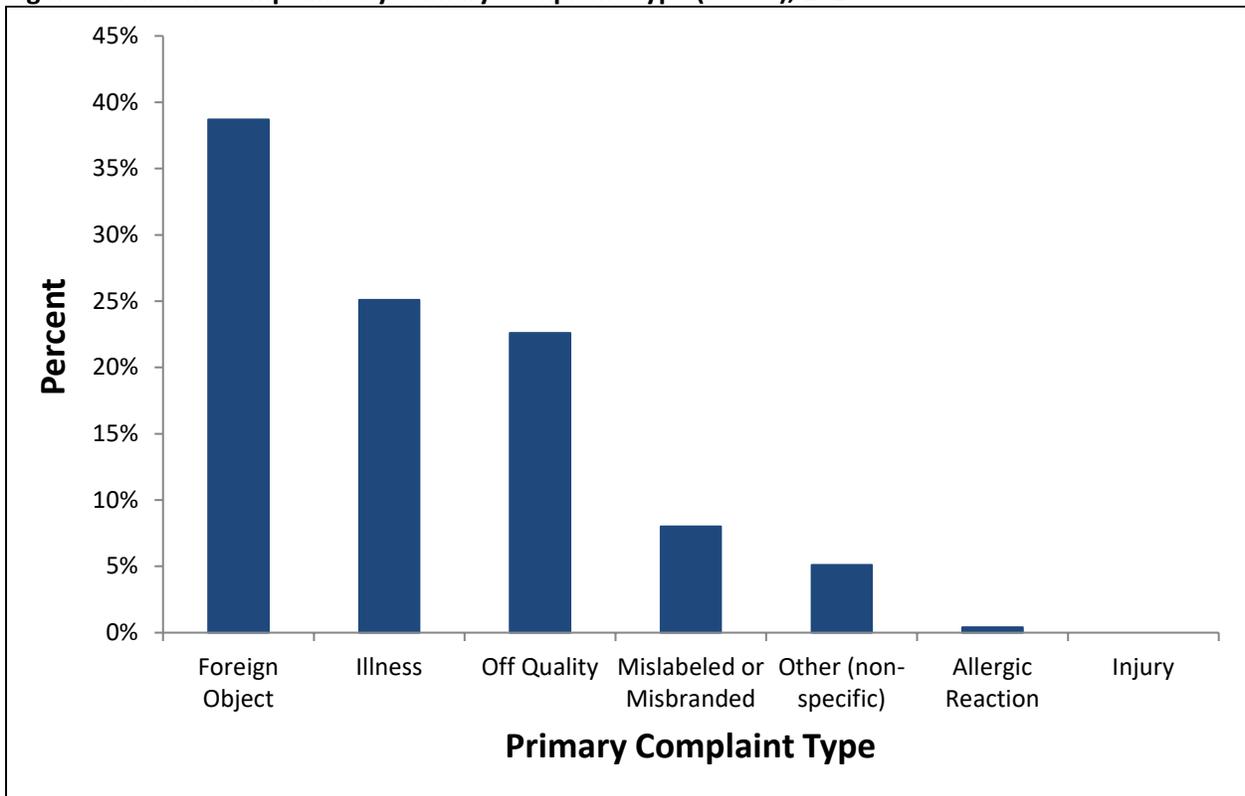
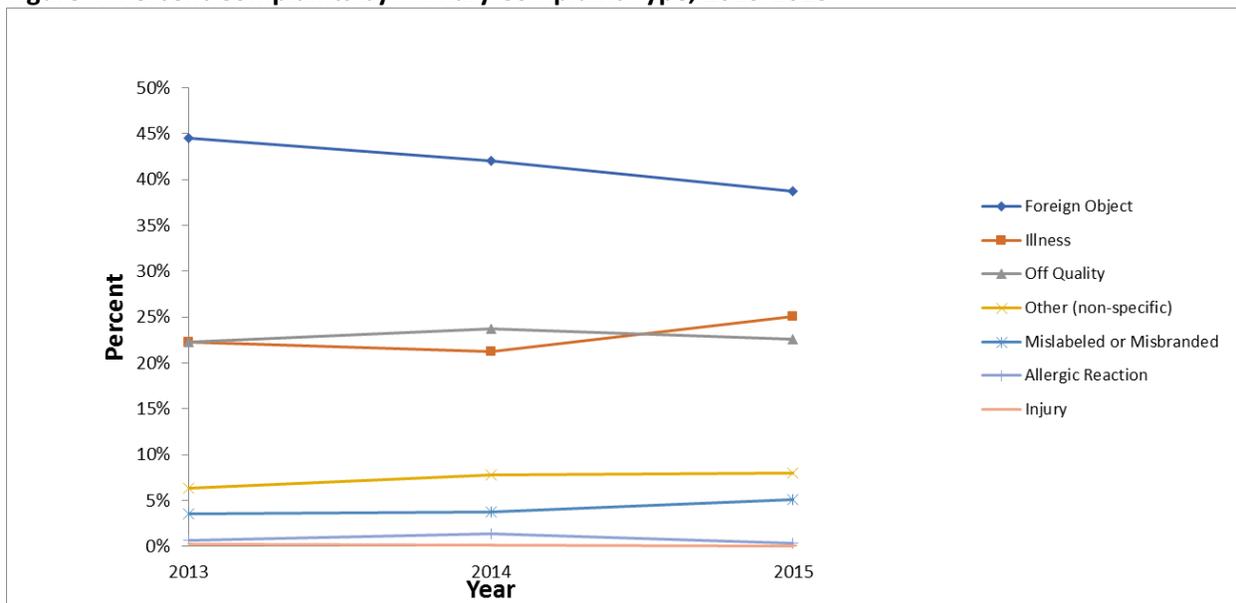


Figure 4. Percent Complaints by Primary Complaint Type, 2013-2015

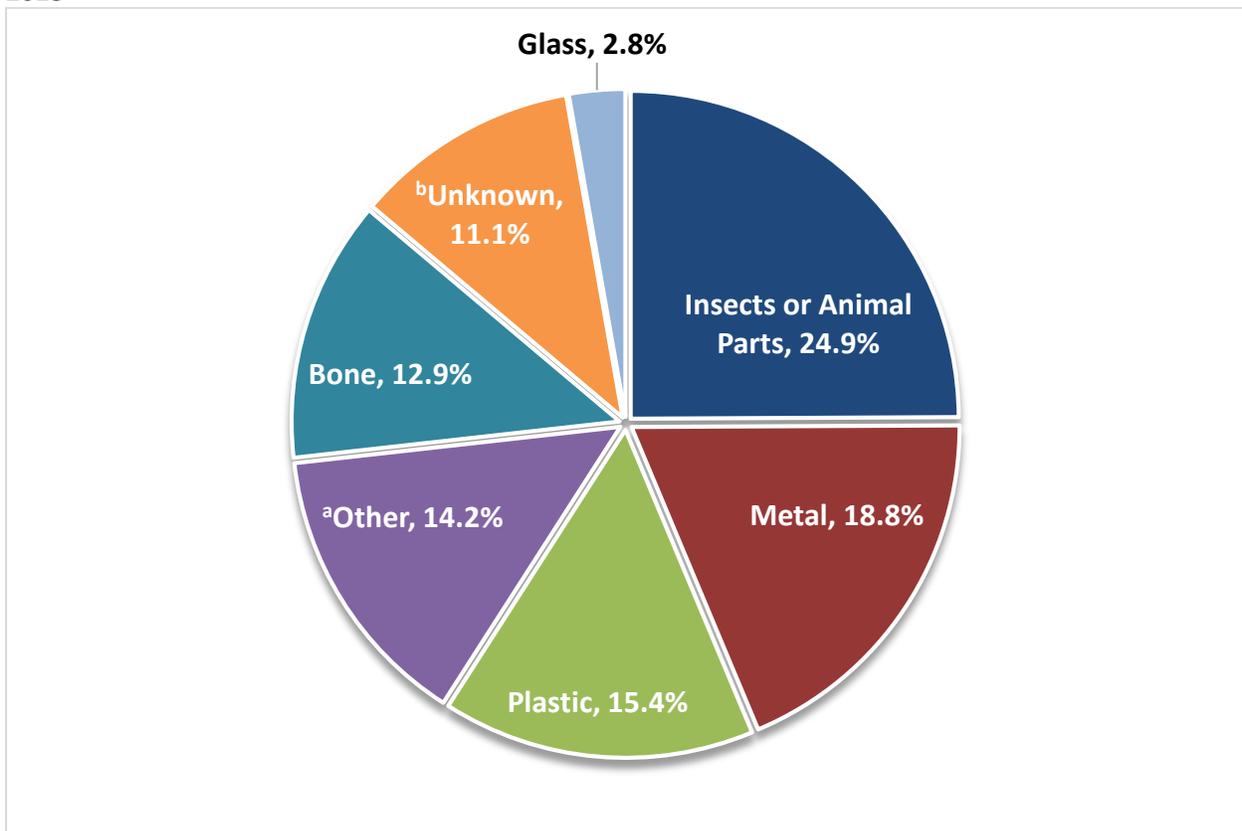


Foreign Objects and Injury

There were 325 (38.7%) foreign object complaints reported in 2015, a slight decrease from 2014 (341/811, 42.0%). Insects and animal parts (81, 24.9%) were the foreign objects most frequently reported (Figure 5). Injury without a foreign object present was not reported, but injury reported as a secondary complaint to a foreign object constituted 43 (13.2%) complaints. This is similar to the percentage of foreign object complaints with injury reported in 2014.

Among complaints for which one or more injuries were reported (43, 13.2%), laceration and mouth irritation (16, 37.2%) was the most common, followed by choking (13, 30.2%), and dental issues, i.e. broken or loose teeth and toothaches (12, 27.9%). Reports of injury in 2015 were most commonly associated with bones (14, 32.6%) and metal (12, 27.9%). An injury requiring a medical visit was reported in eight complaints (18.6%). Six of these medical visits were due to broken or loose teeth from hard foreign material. Table 4 summarizes the primary foreign object complaints entered into CCMS in 2015.

Figure 5. Percent of Types of Foreign Objects Reported (n=325) for Primary Foreign Object Complaints, 2015



^a“Other” includes foreign objects such as band-aids, fecal material, rocks, and stems.

^b“Unknown” indicates that no description of the foreign object was provided by the consumer or the description provided was insufficient to categorize further.

Table 4. Summary of Primary Foreign Object Complaints, 2015

Foreign Object Complaints	
Number (%) of complaints	325 (38.7%)
Most common foreign object type reported	Insects and Animal Parts (81, 24.9%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Beef (118, 36.3%) ^a
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (105, 32.3%) ^a
Number of complaints leading to injury	43 (13.2%)
Reported medical visit from injury	8/43 (18.6%)
Most common foreign object associated with injury	Bones
Most common injury reported with foreign object	Laceration and Mouth Irritation

^aThere were 328 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 325 primary foreign object complaints.

Illness

Illness complaints increased from 172 (21.2%) in 2014 to 211 (25.1%) in 2015. The most commonly reported illness symptoms were diarrhea (146, 69.2%), abdominal pain (73, 34.6%), nausea (59, 28.0%) and vomiting (55, 26.1%). A report of medical attention was noted in 56 (26.5%) illness complaints received in 2015. In fourteen (25.0%) of those reporting medical attention, the consumer reported being hospitalized for at least 24 hours.

Laboratory confirmation of illness, in which culture or rapid tests were performed by a medical professional, was reported for four illness complaints in 2015. Three laboratory confirmed complaints reported a positive *Salmonella* diagnosis and one complaint reported dual infection with *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. Chicken (4) products were reported as the suspected food vehicles in all these complaints. Investigation into two of the *Salmonella* illnesses identified chicken products which had been recalled prior to the complaints being reported to FSIS. Investigation into the other two *Salmonella* illnesses did not definitively determine a link between the suspected food products and illness. Table 5 summarizes illness complaints entered into CCMS in 2015.

Table 5. Summary of Primary Illness Complaints, 2015

Illness Complaints	
Number (%) of complaints	211 (25.1%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (79, 36.7%) ^a
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (84, 39.1%) ^a
Most common reported first symptom onset range	0-3 hours (88, 41.7%)
Most common reported symptom	Diarrhea (146, 69.2%)
Reported medical visit	56 (26.5%)
Medical visit with hospitalization of more than 24 hours	14 reported
Laboratory confirmed illnesses	4 reported
Most common laboratory confirmed etiology	<i>Salmonella</i> spp.

^aThere were 215 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 211 primary illness complaints.

Mislabeling or Misbranded and Allergic Reaction

Primary complaints of mislabeling or misbranding accounted for 67 (8.0%) consumer complaints in 2015, an increase from 2014 (50, 6.2%). When characterized further, 20 (29.9%) complaints involved concerns that the ingredients statement or labeling claim (i.e. “Gluten Free”) was incorrect. Concerns about missing or incorrect USDA mark of inspection were also frequently reported (11, 16.4%). There were 69 FSIS-regulated products for 67 mislabeling or misbranded complaints. Among these complaints, fully cooked-not shelf stable products (21, 30.4%) were the most common processing type and beef (20, 29.0%) was the most common commodity.

In 2015, three (< 1.0%) complaints reported allergic reaction as the primary complaint type. These complaints were documented as a primary allergic reaction when the symptoms reported closely resembled those of an allergic reaction (e.g. rash, wheezing, etc.), the consumer did not report a history of food allergies or indicate the product may be mislabeled. Medical attention with hospitalization lasting more than 24 hours was reported in one of these complaints. For each primary allergic reaction complaint, a different FSIS commodity and processing type were reported and no trends were noted among the complaints.

More commonly, allergic reaction was reported secondary to a complaint of mislabeling or misbranding (11/67, 16.4%). The most commonly reported allergic reaction symptoms were rash and/or itching (8, 72.3%), swelling (3, 27.3%) and nausea (3, 27.3%). Seven (63.6%) consumers reported previous clinical diagnosis of an allergy to specific foods. Four noted allergies to peanuts, followed by one report each for shellfish, egg, and dairy. Investigation into these complaints did not find evidence of product contamination with undeclared allergens. Medical attention was reported in 63.6% of the complaints and there were no reported hospitalizations lasting 24 hours or more. Table 6 summarizes allergic reaction complaints secondary to mislabeling entered into CCMS in 2015.

Table 6. Summary of Allergic Reaction Complaints Secondary to Mislabeling or Misbranded, 2015

Secondary Allergic Reaction Complaints	
Number of secondary complaints	11 (16.4%) ^a
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken and Pork (3, 27% each) ^b
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (4, 36.3%) ^b
Most common reported first symptom onset	<1 hour (11, 100%)
Most common reported symptom	Rash and/or Itching (8, 72.7%)
Reported medical visit	7 (63.6%)
Reported hospitalization of more than 24 hours	0 reported
Most common diagnosed food allergy (of those self-reporting clinical diagnosis)	Peanut

^a11 out of 67 allergic reactions were reported secondary to mislabeling or misbranding complaints.

^bThere were 11 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 11 secondary allergic reaction complaints.

Off-Quality

Off-quality complaints have consistently been one of the most common complaint types reported for all years. In 2015, off-quality complaints were the third most common primary complaint type (190, 22.6%). This was similar to the occurrence of off-quality complaints in 2014 (192, 23.7%). When these complaints were characterized further into one or more categories, off-appearance (112, 58.9%) was the most common issue reported in off-quality complaints; off-appearance complaints include but are not limited to reports of mold and off-color. Off-odor (45, 26.7%) and off-taste (27, 14.2%) were less commonly reported. There were 200 products associated with these complaints; Beef (64, 32.0%) was the most common commodity and raw-not ground products (77, 38.5%) were the most common processing type reported for off-quality complaints.

Other, Non-Specific

Forty-three (5.1%) complaints were recorded as other, non-specific in 2015. There was a slight decrease in the reporting of other, non-specific complaints between 2014 and 2015 (48, 5.9% vs. 43, 5.1%, respectively). Fifteen (34.9%) of these complaints involved problems with packaging, such as an incomplete vacuum seal. Examples of other reports noted for this complaint type include concerns with sanitation and suspected fraud. There were 45 products associated with these complaints; Chicken (20, 44.4%) was the most common commodity reported and raw-not ground products (20, 44.4%) were the most common reported processing type.

Resolution of Consumer Complaints

In 2015, 555 (66.2%) complaints were resolved without further investigative action by FSIS. The complaints were resolved after it was determined through consumer interview and complaint evaluation that the issue reported did not present a food safety concern or the involved products had already been recalled and additional action was not warranted (Table 7). The remaining complaints were resolved through other actions by FSIS: 162 (19.3%) complaints resulted in issuing alerts to inspection personnel for secondary review at the plant identified in the complaint; 22 (2.6%) were referred to FSIS's Office of Investigation, Enforcement and Audit for potential investigation into criminal violation or product tampering; and 100 (11.9%) prompted a non-criminal investigation.

Table 7. Summary of Complaints Resolved without Further Investigative Action, 2015

Investigations	
Number of complaints	555 (66%)
Most common complaint type	Foreign Object (176, 31.7%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (186, 32.7%) ^a
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (172, 30.2%) ^a

^aThere were 569 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 555 complaints resolved without further investigative action.

Triggers which led to requesting a formal investigation included, but were not limited to, reports of laboratory confirmed illness, evidence of a potentially wide-spread problem indicated by multiple similar complaints involving the same product and establishment, and a noncompliance history suggestive of a link between a complaint and problems in the plant that produced the product. At a minimum, a formal investigation includes: follow-up interviews with the consumer and in-plant personnel, collection of evidence by FSIS for verification, review of standard operating procedures, and inquiry into consumer complaints reported to the company. As necessary, the food product and any related evidence may be sent for laboratory sampling.

Out of 100 complaints leading to a non-criminal investigation, FSIS did not find evidence of a public health hazard or issue requiring further action in 81 (81.0%) of the investigations. Forty-eight investigations (48.0%) were related to foreign object complaints, making it the leading complaint type investigated. Nineteen (19.0%) investigations identified evidence of issues in the manufacturing plant that warranted additional response from the manufacturer or FSIS. Of these 19 investigations resulting in additional actions, voluntary actions initiated by the manufacturer in coordination with FSIS, such as retraining employees, were the most common (15, 78.9%). Investigations which revealed deficiencies that led to enforcement and regulatory actions, such as documenting noncompliances or notices of intended enforcement were much less frequent (4, 21.1%). The complaint types attributed to these enforcement actions were mislabeling (2), foreign object (2). Between 2001-2014, there have been 11 recalls prompted by consumer complaints entered into CCMS. In 2015, no CCMS complaint investigations resulted in a recall. Table 8 summarizes investigated complaints in 2015.

Table 8. Summary of Investigated Complaints, 2015

Investigations	
Number of complaints	100 (11.9%)
Most common complaint type	Foreign Object (48, 48.0%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (34, 33.3%) ^a
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (33, 32.4%) ^a
Investigations resulting in plant action	19 (19.0%)
Most common investigation plant action	Voluntary Plant Action (15/19, 78.9%)

^aThere were 102 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 100 complaints resolved through formal investigation.

Summary

Consumer complaints provide FSIS with valuable information on potential hazards associated with meat, poultry and egg products in commerce. They also provide information on hazards associated with certain food products, health-related outcomes associated with these hazards, and consumer reporting behaviors.

While this report provides a description of consumer complaints reported in 2015, there are considerations which should be taken into account. Several factors can affect reporting each year and not all the concerns that consumers may have with FSIS-regulated products are reported. Often, consumer complaint reporting often increases after highly publicized recalls, such as those involving large illness outbreaks, suggesting that media attention can increase consumer reporting. The motivation to report an incident may increase when the consumer can confidently link a food product with a hazard such as a foreign object. This could help to explain why foreign object complaints have been the number complaint type for all years that the data has been tracked. Because of potential fluctuations in reporting, it cannot be assumed that increases or decreases in complaint reporting represents an actual increase or decrease in the occurrence of any particular food hazard.

Complaints in which response actions do not rise to the level of a formal investigation may contain unverified information. As a result, certain details such as the specific type of foreign material may not be accurately reported to FSIS. The information presented in this report is documented as self-reported from the consumer or as further verified through a formal investigation. Understanding consumer perception of a food safety hazard can improve information gathering at the time of complaint intake and help FSIS guide its public health messaging.

The data provided in this report offers insight into consumer reporting behaviors and reinforces the importance of consumer complaints as indicators of potential food safety problems in commerce and for evaluating the effectiveness of in-plant control measures. Consumer complaints are an essential component of FSIS surveillance activities and enhance the Agency's ability to meet its public health mission.