

## USDA SAYS MORE CHICKENS ON THE LINE. WORKERS SAY, THAT'S NOT FINE



Poultry processing lines find it very hard to hold on to employees, who find the task very tasking and arduous. So much so, that there have been reports of workers quitting within the first hour of joining. Jorge Polanco-Mercado, a worker at poultry processing line in Alabama says that he has many quitting even before they finish their first shift. They just couldn't cope with the speed of the processing line. Polanco, who spoke in Spanish, requested that his plant not be named, said that his job entailed hanging chickens on the hooks at around 57 and 60 chickens per minute. That works out to an astonishing, almost one chicken per second for manual work. He said, "Some would come into the plant and work one hour, and resign because it was too fast to keep up with. Every week they had to hire new workers." he said It comes as a surprise to learn that U.S. Department of Agriculture and the White House have proposed new poultry inspection rules that would allow many plants to further speed up their processing lines. Cass Sunstein, head of OIRA said, "The Department of Agriculture has proposed to streamline antiquated poultry inspection requirements, allowing companies to choose a more flexible approach with five-year savings in excess of \$1 billion." The United Food and Commercial Workers Union has raised concerns, with Tom Fritzsche, a staff attorney at the Southern Poverty Law Center, which handles many poultry worker cases, calling it a bad idea, considering that the most common grouse amongst poultry workers was that it was already too fast. The Department of Agriculture says that the rules are intended to improve monitoring of food safety and quality and upgrade the prevalent system, which they felt was outdated. Under the rules it planned to make private plants responsible for checking the chickens for imperfections that make them unfit for human consumption, while the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) inspectors would detect bacteria and other more serious concealed dangers. Allowing private plants self-monitoring is projected to phase out 800 inspection jobs, and save around \$95 million over three years. Consumer advocacy groups have expressed reservations and feel that the cost-cutting move will indirectly help the poultry industry. With no presence of USDA human inspectors, the rule could actually allow plants to move from "70 to 140 birds per minute to a maximum of 175." This would come as a windfall to the efficiency-minded poultry industry, bent on maximizing profits, irrespective of how adversely it would affect the workers. The National Chicken Council spokesman Tom Super, disagreed saying that it was wrong to assume that it would impact workers but would modernize the inspection process. "Just because the pilot project allowed plants to operate at higher line-speeds as in the proposed rule, it does not mean all plants will continuously operate at this higher line speed," he said. Mark Lauritsen, head of the UFCW's food packing and processing division said that, plants without doubt, would work at the highest permissible speeds, increasing chances of injury. "I think it's about squeezing more production out of overworked workers. This is the poultry industry's rule ... They squeeze every ounce of profit out of workers, and they notoriously under report injuries." Since many of the workers working inside poultry plants are Hispanic and refugees from Africa and a sizeable portion are supposedly, illegal immigrants, serious concerns about worker-violations have been raised. USDA announced that the proposals were being put on hold, until all interested parties have had their say.