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Senator Feinstein Secures Commitment from DHS Secretary Chertoff to Make Agriculture Inspections a Priority

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) today announced that she has secured a commitment from U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to make agriculture inspections at all points of entry into the United States a top priority of the Department. The agreement seeks to strengthen the nation's first line of defense against destructive agricultural pests.

Pest infestation cost the American agriculture industry \$41 billion annually. And in California alone, pest infestations cost farmers about \$3 billion a year. Yet, since the Department of Homeland Security took over responsibility for agriculture inspections in 2003, fewer agricultural inspections have been conducted at key points of entry and the morale of agriculture specialists has been low.

“I believe there is a serious problem with agriculture inspections at the Department of Homeland Security. The causes are many. The stakes are high. The impact potentially devastating. Here are the problems:

- **One, agriculture inspections are down. We know that agriculture inspectors at DHS are being taken off of their jobs 22 percent of the time and assigned other jobs.**
- **Two, pest infestations are up. California alone has three medfly infestations this year. And, other states have similar problems. Florida has seen a 29 percent increase in pest outbreaks over the last four years.”**

“These two factors combined are endangering our nation's food supply and agriculture industry,” Senator Feinstein said.

“I have been assured by Secretary Chertoff that the agriculture inspectors' time will no longer be used for anything other than agriculture inspection. Ag inspectors perform specialized duties that will now be recognized as a primary function at the Department of Homeland Security.”

“I will be watching closely to make sure that agriculture inspections become a priority at the Department of Homeland Security and that the necessary changes are implemented.”

After holding meetings with Senator Feinstein, Secretary Chertoff agreed to reform the Department’s agriculture inspection process and send two memos to all of DHS’ Customs and Border Protection field office employees informing them of the changes:

- The first memo will reinforce the importance of agriculture inspections within the Department, and reaffirm that agriculture specialists are to be dedicated to the mission of protecting our nation from foreign pests and plant or animal diseases.
- The second memo will announce a new position within the Department, Deputy Executive Director for Agriculture Operational Oversight, who will be charged with ensuring a more consistent application of agriculture inspection policy across all points of entry.

This new Deputy Executive Director will be responsible for Agriculture Operational Oversight for:

- Overseeing the Joint Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agriculture Quality Assurance program;
- Monitoring agricultural performance for risk and efficiency;
- Ensuring appropriate staffing and budget allocation for agriculture inspection; and
- Ensuring that all directives and polities specific to the agricultural programs are executed in compliance with the agriculture mission.

(Copies of the DHS memos and a letter to Senator Feinstein from Secretary Chertoff are attached to this release.)

In response to Secretary Chertoff’s commitment to improve agriculture inspections, Senator Feinstein today withdrew her amendment to the Farm bill that sought to transfer responsibility for conducting agricultural inspections at all points of entry in the United States from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) back to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

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