

February 17, 2026

To Whom It May Concern:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is requesting OMB approval for continuation of data collection activities through the National Environmental Assessment Reporting System (NEARS) [Published document: 2026-01615 (91 FR 3504)]. CDC estimates an annual 1,524 annual burden hours for registration and training new food program personnel, conducting retail food program manager interviews, recording observations and entering data into the NEARS system for an estimated 276 foodborne outbreaks. As faculty in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota, we routinely use data from NEARS to evaluate our food safety systems and to train public health students and environmental public health professionals. We believe this is a small cost to maintain a valuable public health resource and encourage OMB to approve the request.

Data from CDC suggest that more than 60% of 800 foodborne illness outbreaks that occur each year in the United States, occur in restaurants. NEARS is a critical data system for understanding the causes of foodborne illness outbreaks in restaurants and informing prevention efforts. Environmental assessments submitted to NEARS seek to identify the contributing factors and root causes of foodborne illness outbreaks. NEARS provides a standardized framework for conducting and reporting environmental assessments. This allows participants to easily review their own findings and allows comparisons across jurisdictions. Although only a relatively small proportion of the estimated 3,000 agencies regulating restaurants in the United States report to NEARS, its central repository allows all public health agencies and academic partners to monitor and assess trends in the causes of foodborne illness outbreaks. When we have a better understanding of what causes foodborne illness outbreaks and why, we can develop better prevention measures to drive down the occurrence of foodborne illness.¹

The FDA Model Food code provides the scientific basis for regulating restaurants in the United States. The results of environmental assessments, such as those NEARS tracks, provide valuable scientific knowledge to inform changes to improve the Food Code. Data from NEARS has demonstrated how ill food workers contribute to outbreaks in restaurants² and how retail food managers and policies can contribute to or mitigate outbreaks.³ These findings allow for targeted corrective actions to stop future outbreaks and provide data to inform changes to the Food Code. Conducting environmental assessments is already a key function of public health agencies. The additional burden of reporting to NEARS is relatively low while the potential benefits are great. As a central agency for public health in the nation, CDC plays an important role in maintaining this system. As with other public health systems,^{4,5} investing in NEARS has the potential to pay itself back in improved food safety.

Sincerely,

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References

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