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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Health Districts Seek To Increase Food Establishment License Fees**

The seven Idaho public health districts are asking the Legislature to allow them to increase the fees charged to food establishments in an attempt to bring the fees closer to the actual cost of providing the services. Idaho law requires the health districts to protect the public with annual inspections of the more than 9,000 licensed food establishments in the state. But the current \$65 annual fee set by the Legislature only covers about 23% of the cost of providing the inspections. The districts subsidize the food program with taxpayer dollars from the state and counties.

Most other health district fees for services are designed to pay for themselves and are adjusted annually for inflation. Only the fees for the food program, child care, and swimming pool inspections are set by the Legislature.

As taxpayer support of the health districts shrinks along with state and county budgets, the food program subsidy is taking a bigger bite out of other public health programs. The seven health districts have reduced their combined workforce by 54 full time positions (or roughly eight percent) over the last three fiscal years. The result has been the reorganization of personnel and programs, as well as the deferral of critical infrastructure improvements and maintenance.

“Idaho Food Code requires us to provide food inspection services, but doesn’t allow us to collect enough money from the places we inspect to cover our costs.” explained Rene LeBlanc, South Central Public Health District director. “The food program is such a critical disease prevention service, and we want to continue to provide it for all our communities.”

The health districts use state and county tax dollars to help supplement preventive health services to low income families. These services not only improve the health of those receiving them but protect

the health of the entire community. With the food program consuming a larger proportion of those limited tax dollars, preventive health services become at risk for further reductions.

Beginning last spring, the health districts worked with a group of food industry representatives and together crafted a proposal that would increase the food fees to cover roughly 67% of the cost of ensuring the safety of food served to the public at restaurants, grocery stores, school cafeterias, farmers' markets, and mobile vendors.

“We partner with restaurants to promote safe food handling, and we want them to be successful,” said LeBlanc. “We know the economy is challenging, but the fee increase is an affordable investment for the safety of our citizens.”

Senate Bill 1083 would create a three-tiered fee structure, with those food establishments presenting the greatest risk to the public paying the highest fee. Most Idaho restaurants fall into the medium risk category (see table). The change in fee structure wouldn't be fully implemented for two years.

Facility Type	Health District Cost Per Facility	Proposed Fee (Discounted by Both State and County Funds, 33.2%)
High Risk <sup>i</sup>	\$317	\$212
Medium Risk	\$300	\$200
Temporary/Intermittent/ Mobile	\$285	\$191

*<sup>i</sup>High risk food establishment involves extensive handling of raw ingredients, heating and cooling of potentially hazardous food, and hot and cold holding of potentially hazardous food. Most Idaho food establishments fall in the medium risk category.*

“When we were presenting our budget request to the Legislature last year, we were instructed to reexamine our fee structures,” LeBlanc said. “We found the largest disparity between permit fees and tax dollars in the food program.”

Industry lobbyists are working to defeat the food fee legislation arguing the increase is too much, especially as many food establishments are closing because of the economy. However, a review of applications for new restaurant licenses indicates there is actually a 2.3% increase statewide in the number of licensed food establishments this year compared to last. When fully implemented, the fee increase would amount to roughly 40-cents a day for a year-round food establishment.