

SENATE COMMITTEE FINDS PLENTY OF FOOD FOR THOUGHT IN TESTING, INSPECTION PROPOSALS

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Over the past two years, American consumers have faced tainted food products that caused hospitalization and death.

Spinach, lettuce, peanut butter, canned chili and pet food had to be recalled. Last month, about one million pounds of ground meat were pulled off the market. Consumer confidence in food safety dropped 16 percent over the last 18 months, according to testimony by Caroline Smith DeWaal of the Center for Science in the Public Interest at a Senate food safety hearing on Tuesday.

Less than a generation ago, Americans sat down to eat assuming their fresh meats, fruits and vegetables were safe for consumption. Farm-to-table distances were shorter, and product varieties and personal tastes were more limited. Terrorism had not raised its head, and foreign imports were fewer. Fresh raspberries, exceptionally perishable, weren't flown from South America to please American palates on a dreary winter day.



Ground beef was one of the many products hit by sweeping food recalls.

(Photo by JEANELL NORVELL,
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There are the roughly 300 different U.S. ports of entry for food products and

12 different federal departments and agencies involved in food safety, inspection and testing, along with approximately 3,000 state and local agencies. The U.S. Food Safety and Inspection Service was established to ensure the safety of meat, poultry and eggs. The Food and Drug Administration is responsible for all other food products.

The FDA consulted an outside advisory body for recommendations on food safety and released its plan in November. Products that were previously a problem would be given closer scrutiny, rather than trying to catch every possible problem, a focus of the plan's critics. The FDA plan's hallmark is federal government coordination, not control, of the food safety system.

The Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee heard from Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt, along with industry, consumer and state government witnesses.

Citing "starvation budgets and absent leadership," Chairman Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., set the tone for his Democratic committee colleagues' concern that the administration proposal doesn't go far enough.

"Money isn't everything, but it is an indication of a nation's priorities," Kennedy said, alluding to President George W. Bush's threat to veto legislation funding food safety.

The time has come in the United States for a single inspection agency, said Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee Chairman and HELP member.

The administration plan relies on voluntary industry compliance, improved inter-agency and intergovernmental communications, and foreign trade agreements that would keep unsafe products out of the supply chain in the first place. Leavitt signed such a deal this week with the Chinese government.

Although the current system is good, "you need to skate where the puck's going to be" and re-engineer it for the future, Leavitt told lawmakers.

The focus would be on greater penalties, stronger certification, promoting good importing practices and efficient and interoperable response tools. He said current industry-driven recall and safe-again notice response systems work well.

Several senators were surprised to learn that the FDA does not have product-recall authority. Instead, the producer is notified by the FDA. Some companies have refused to recall, as was the case during the pet-food scare, and then the FDA alerts the public via the media.

If one brand or variety is recalled there are huge business losses, especially losses to small businesses. As a result, the food industry in general is seeking standards so that consumers will not avoid all of the product across the board, Leavitt said.