

FDA would boost food inspections under Senate bill

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In this Nov. 16, 2010 file photo, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nev., gestures during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington. The Food and Drug Administration would have to step up inspections of food processors under legislation the Senate is expected to pass this week. The bill, which has stalled in that chamber for more than a year, would give the FDA authority to order a recall of tainted products. Today, the agency must negotiate with sellers of tainted food to do a voluntary recall. The bill would also require food manufacturers and farms to follow stricter standards to keep food safe. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon, File)

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The bill, which has stalled in that chamber for more than a year, would give the FDA authority to order a recall of tainted products. Today, the agency must negotiate with sellers of tainted food to issue a voluntary recall. The bill would also require [food manufacturers](#) and farms to follow stricter safety standards.

Supporters say passage is critical in the wake of large-scale outbreaks of salmonella and E. coli in peanuts, eggs and produce. Those outbreaks have exposed a lack of resources and authority at the FDA as the embattled agency struggled to contain and trace the contaminated products. The agency rarely inspects many food facilities and farms, visiting some every decade or so and others not at all.

The bill would emphasize prevention so the agency could try to stop the outbreaks before they begin.

Despite wide bipartisan support, the legislation stalled as it came under fire from advocates of buying locally produced food and operators of small farms, who say it would could bankrupt some small businesses. Senators agreed before Congress left for Thanksgiving to exempt some of those operations from costly food safety plans required of larger companies.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev. got an agreement to move the legislation by allowing Republicans to offer amendments not relevant to the bill. Oklahoma Sen. Tom Coburn is expected to offer an amendment to place a moratorium on spending for "earmarks," or pet projects in lawmakers' states and districts, and Nebraska Sen. Mike Johanns could offer another to repeal an arcane business tax reporting provision of the health overhaul passed earlier this year.

Democratic Sen. Max Baucus of Montana, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, will also offer an amendment on the health tax

provision. The Senate is expected to begin voting on the amendments Monday.

Whether the [food](#) safety bill can make it to the president's desk during the brief lame-duck congressional session is unclear since the House passed a different version of the legislation in 2009. Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin, the sponsor of the bill, said he has agreement from some members in the House to take up the Senate bill if it is passed.

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