

FDA overhaul aims to increase food safety

January 18 2011, By Carrie Arnold

On January 4, President Barack Obama signed the Food Safety Modernization Act into law. The bill has been called a "sweeping overhaul" of the Food and Drug Administration, the first major update to the FDA's powers since 1932.

Critics say that the bill, though ambitious, does not and cannot ensure an adequately safe food supply. Only by consumer demands for healthful, uncontaminated foods will [food manufacturers](#) and processors clean up their acts.

"This bill will actually require companies to actually identify hazards linked to their products, and to put controls in place to make sure those hazards don't arise during production," said Caroline Smith DeWaal, the [food safety](#) director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

"The biggest change is the focus on prevention," said Douglas Karas, a spokesperson for the FDA.

The need for prevention is significant: the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) estimate that each year, 48 million Americans -- one in six -- acquire a foodborne illness. Of these, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die. The annual cost to society of unsafe food is measured in the billions of dollars.

Emphasizing the FDA's new role in preventing foodborne disease, the recent food safety bill focuses on several main areas: increasing inspections of food manufacturing and processing facilities, requiring

these facilities to take pre-emptive measures to prevent contamination, identifying foods at high risk for foodborne illness outbreaks, and developing an electronic tracking system that will follow food from farm to fork.

But Doug Powell, an associate professor for food safety at Kansas State University, isn't sure that increased legislation will lead to increased food safety. "I don't think you can legislate hand-washing," he said. "But wherever you're working, you need to have a corporate culture that says 'You will wash your hands.'"

Powell believes that only by dramatically altering the corporate culture of food manufacturers will food safety in the U.S. be significantly improved. Currently, he said, many companies only worry about food safety after an outbreak has already occurred.

"You would think it would be bad for business to make people sick," Powell said, yet companies continue to ignore basic food safety rules.

Although the new bill increases inspections of food processing plants, Powell said, it's not nearly enough to force a change in day-to-day operations. The frequency of inspections will increase from once every five to ten years to once every three years.

But DeWaal said that federal inspections aren't intended to prevent disease outbreaks.

"The purpose of an inspection is to make sure that companies take the law seriously," DeWaal said. "The steps that will really prevent the outbreaks are the ones the companies take" between inspections, such as more stringent rules about hand washing and sanitation.

Officials at both the FDA and the Center for Science in the Public

Interest said they worked closely with food manufacturers in the development of, and advocacy for, the new food safety bill.

"Many in the food industry have pioneered "best practices" for prevention [of foodborne illness]," the FDA said in an official statement. Yet the number of large, multi-state outbreaks continues to increase and is even beginning to affect food traditionally thought of as safe, such as peanut butter and chocolate, leaving people like Powell wondering whether the new bill does enough to ensure food safety.

"Anyone can clean up for an inspection," Powell said. "The FDA needs more resources."

Food corporations have a lot to lose from unsafe food, DeWaal pointed out. Not only are the actual recalls expensive, but manufacturers also suffer from "collateral damage" during an outbreak.

"When the spinach in one farm field became contaminated with E. coli, the entire spinach industry was impacted, and consumer confidence in that product fell for several years after that outbreak," DeWaal said. This means that the food industry has the incentive to put pressure on itself to further safe growing and processing conditions.

Besides internal pressure to reduce this collateral damage, the FDA is beginning a trial of a new electronic food tracking system as part of the Food Safety Modernization Act. Although food companies are currently required to track the products they purchase and then ship out, this information is usually on paper and not always easily available. Different departments in the corporation are often responsible for different aspects of production and may have their own methods of tracking the information.

Public health officials rely on this information during a disease outbreak

to determine the source of an outbreak and all the foods that might be affected. Lengthy paper trails complicate investigations and increase the chance that a non-contaminated food will be recalled and become collateral damage.

All of these are positive steps, Powell admits, but he remains unconvinced that the bill will have a dramatic affect on food safety. He would like to see companies advertise the safety of their food. And both Karas and DeWaal admit that it's too soon to know how the new bill will actually impact food safety.

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