

Obama to sign bill to improve nation's food safety

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President Barack Obama talks with media aboard Air Force One soon after leaving at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu, Monday, Jan. 3, 2011, en route to Washington after a family vacation. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

(AP) -- In an indication of coming tensions with the GOP-controlled House, President Barack Obama on Tuesday was signing into law an overhaul of the nation's food safety system as Republicans talked of withholding \$1.4 billion needed to put the new requirements into place.

Congress passed the bill at the end of the year after several serious outbreaks of E. coli and [salmonella poisoning](#) in peanuts, eggs and produce in the past few years. It would increase inspections at [food processing](#) facilities and force recalls of tainted products.

Obama made improving food safety a priority shortly after taking office in 2009. But at a cost of \$1.4 billion in new funding over five years, some Republicans who are looking to cut federal spending say the new law may be unaffordable.

"I think we'll look very carefully at the funding before we support \$1.4 billion," said Rep. Jack Kingston, who hopes to become chairman of the agriculture subcommittee of the House panel that helps spend the government's money.

Republicans will control the House when Congress comes back into session Wednesday.

Kingston said "our [food supply](#) is 99.999 percent safe." In an interview with The Associated Press on Monday, he cited recent federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) estimates that 48 million people - or one in six Americans - are sickened yearly by foodborne illnesses. Of that, 180,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die annually.

In a country with more than 308 million people, the Georgia Republican said the figures show that the [Food and Drug Administration](#), which regulates most of the nation's food supply, is doing a "very decent job on food safety already."

Obama planned to sign the bill Tuesday at the White House after returning from a holiday vacation in his native Hawaii. It will be the first major overhaul of the U.S. food safety system since the 1930s.

"It will bring our food safety system into the 21st century, improving health, saving lives and helping Americans feel confident that when they sit down at their dinner table they won't end up in the hospital," Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told reporters Monday during a conference call.

The new law will require larger farms and food manufacturers to prepare detailed food safety plans and tell the FDA how they are striving to keep their food safe at different stages of production.

It also emphasizes prevention to help stop outbreaks before they happen. The recent salmonella and E. coli outbreaks exposed the FDA's lack of resources and authority as it struggled to trace and contain the contaminated products.

The agency rarely inspects most food facilities and farms, visiting some about once a decade and others not at all.

The bill had broad bipartisan backing in Congress, but was criticized by advocates of buying locally sourced food and small-farm operators who said the new requirements could force some of them into bankruptcy. Senators eventually agreed to exempt some of those operations from the costly food safety plans required of bigger companies, but that move upset [food safety](#) advocates and larger growers.

Those exemptions are in the legislation Obama is signing.

Many major food companies also support the bill, recognizing that safe food is good for business.

The new law would:

- Allow the FDA to order a recall of tainted food. Currently it can only negotiate with businesses for voluntary recalls.

- Require the agency to develop new safety regulations for producers of the highest-risk fruits and vegetables.

- Increase inspections of domestic and foreign food facilities; the riskiest

domestic facilities would be inspected every three years.

-Require farms and processors to keep records to help the government trace recalled foods.

The new law would not extend to meat, poultry or processed eggs. The Agriculture Department regulates those foods and subjects them to more rigorous inspections and oversight than foods regulated by the FDA.

Supporters of the overhaul say they intend to press for full funding.

Erik Olson, director of food and consumer safety programs at the Pew Health Group, said the health care costs associated with an outbreak of foodborne illness alone run into the tens of billions of dollars - far beyond the cost of putting the new law into place.

"This will save a great deal of money, both for consumers and for the industry," he said on the call arranged by the administration.

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