

For safer food imports, teach foreign lab workers US requirements

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Amid ongoing concerns about E. coli, Salmonella and other food-borne illnesses, a new facility will take a unique approach to make imports bound for the United States safer: Give foreign technicians who test those foods intensive, hands-on lab training in U.S. government methods, standards and technology, as well as acceptable alternatives.

"The more we can get foreign [food](#) facilities to harmonize their procedures and their work with U.S. requirements, the greater the likelihood of safe imported foods reaching American consumers," says the University of Maryland's Janie Dubois, who directs the new International [Food Safety](#) Training Laboratory (IFSTL). "The FDA can only inspect a tiny fraction of all imports, so food should enter the country safe, well-tested and up to our standards."

Based at the University of Maryland's Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN), the new lab will marry federal and university expertise with the support of the Waters Corporation - a leading manufacturer of high-tech laboratory testing equipment.

In keeping with the new U.S. Food Safety Modernization Act's emphasis on prevention, the initiative aims to improve the safety of food imports before they reach the U.S. border.

Foreign food laboratory workers will learn U.S.-recommended microbiological and chemical analysis methods directly from regulators at the [Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA), Department of Agriculture,

[Environmental Protection Agency](#) (EPA), and other federal agencies. Also, the training will give students a chance to discuss acceptable, alternate analytical methods that regulators call "fit-for-purpose."

"This approach will give students unparalleled insight into the way federal regulators operate, and, critically, how best to apply their techniques to conditions back home," Dubois says.

Nearly two-thirds of fresh fruits and produce sold in the U.S. are imports, as is a significant proportion of seafood. The demand for testing expertise - especially the hands-on variety - far outstrips current technical capacity in many countries.

IFSTL will be the first U.S.-based facility of its kind. JIFSAN - a University of Maryland collaboration with the FDA - will operate the facility and direct instruction. The Waters Corporation is helping build and equip the new lab and assisting in design of the program. The company is a major manufacturer of laboratory equipment used to detect and measure the presence of chemical contaminants in food.

The new lab's first complete class is scheduled to begin on September 12, 2011. Chinese students will get training on methods for testing pesticide contamination in fresh fruits and produce. The official facility dedication is set for Sept. 15. Approximately 200 professionals per year are expected to participate in the self-supporting program.

"We've gotten enthusiastic responses from a number of developing countries, because they see the potential benefits for both their export and domestic markets," Dubois says. "JIFSAN is already actively training overseas, and this facility gives us the chance to further contribute to the harmonization of international food-handling and testing standards."

IFSTL training began this summer with a pilot course on analyzing pesticide residue in fruits and vegetables. A class of 11 laboratory scientists from Latin America was trained at the University of Maryland by U.S. FDA and EPA experts. Instruction was conducted in both English and Spanish. Waters Corporation provided liquid chromatography and mass spectrometry equipment - state-of-the-art technology used to measure the presence of multiple pesticide residues simultaneously.

The IFSTL laboratories are built to handle 20 students per session. Located in the University of Maryland's M-Square research park in suburban-Washington, D.C., right next-door to the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, IFSTL is uniquely positioned to offer high-level, multi-lingual instruction from U.S. scientists.

"This uncommon collaboration promises a powerful response to a serious and growing international concern," says University of Maryland President Wallace D. Loh. "Joining academic, private sector and government expertise makes a lot of sense, and is a uniquely effective way to build international scientific capacity and food safety."

"Waters Corporation is committed to bridging the gap between governments and industry to ensure the best science and most innovative technologies are used to make our food safe," says Waters Corporation Chairman, President and CEO Douglas A. Berthiaume. "We are proud to join with the University of Maryland to create this laboratory that will bolster the capabilities of both the FDA and our global partners as we work together to improve food safety."

More information: Online brochure:
newsdesk.umd.edu/pdf/2011/IFSTL_Brochure_sm.pdf

Provided by University of Maryland

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