FDA airs plan to strengthen rules for imported foods

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50 percent of fresh fruit and 20 percent of fresh vegetables from abroad, agency says.

(HealthDay)—The public will have its first chance Thursday and Friday to weigh in on new federal rules aimed at improving the safety of food imported into the United States.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's first public meeting on imported food safety rules that the agency initially proposed in July is taking place in Washington, D.C.

About 15 percent of the total U.S. food supply is imported from other countries, including nearly 50 percent of fresh fruit and 20 percent of fresh vegetables, according to the FDA.

Recent food-borne illness outbreaks have increased public concern over the safety of this food supply chain.

For example, at least 153 Americans contracted hepatitis A during the summer from frozen pomegranate seeds imported from Turkey. Around the same time, lettuce imported from Mexico caused at least 642 people to fall ill with cyclosporiasis, a parasitic infection that causes severe diarrhea and other gastrointestinal symptoms, according to the FDA.

The public meeting will focus on two programs the FDA has proposed through its new rules:

- The Foreign Supplier Verification Program would hold food importers liable for keeping track of the safety of the food they bring into the country. Those who fail to protect consumers could be banned from the import business.
- The Accredited Third-Party Audits and Certification Program would create a system for providing credentials to auditors in other countries who would be tasked with inspecting farms and food facilities.

The rules are being created as a result of the Food Safety Modernization Act, which President Barack Obama signed into law in January 2011.

"It is all part of a global movement to elevate food safety standards and to make sure those elevated standards are being met," said Michael Taylor, the FDA's deputy commissioner for foods and veterinary medicine. "The important thing is to really see these rules as an integrated package. They're all about achieving in a comprehensive way the implementation of modern approaches to food safety, whether it comes from the U.S. or overseas."

About 426 people had registered by Tuesday to attend the meeting, with

32 signed up to give public comment, the FDA said.

Taylor expects to receive comment from consumers groups, U.S. food growers and producers, food importers and members of the international community. "We believe there's going to be a strong turnout from the embassies here in Washington," he said.

The United States desperately needs to improve its regulation of imported food, said Sandra Eskin, director for food safety at the Pew Charitable Trusts.

"Right now all we have, if we're lucky, is point-of-entry inspection," Eskin said. "The FDA has estimated that between 1 and 2 percent of products imported are inspected at the border. That doesn't sound like a very strong safety net. That's the importance of this proposed program."

There are a number of outstanding questions about the proposed rule that need to be addressed, Eskin said. Pew officials plan to testify at the public meeting and highlight these questions, she said.

For instance, she added, there needs to be more detail regarding the verification process that importers must implement.

"An importer for the first time is going to be held responsible for the safety of the products he brings into the country," Eskin said. "We want to make sure that the verification programs actually result in a reliable determination. That's critical to the whole foundation of this program."

Pew also wants to make sure that potential conflicts of interest are taken into account when credentialing third-party auditors, and that the standards that auditors must meet are clear and exacting, she said.

The FDA has announced two other public meetings on its proposal. The

second will take place in Miami on Oct. 10-11, and the third will take place in Long Beach, Calif., on Oct. 22-23. Written comments are due to the FDA by the end of November.

"Those are two big ports, and they will probably flesh out the specifics and raise some more questions during those meetings," Eskin said.

More information: For more on food-borne illnesses, visit the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.