

Obama proposes new agency to make Americans' food safer

February 2 2015, by Mary Clare Jalonick



President Barack Obama's new \$4 trillion budget plan is distributed by Senate Budget Committee staffer Eric Chalmers as it arrives on Capitol Hill in Washington, early Monday, Feb. 02, 2015. The fiscal blueprint for the budget year that begins Oct. 1, seeks to raise taxes on wealthier Americans and corporations and use the extra income to lift the fortunes of families who have felt squeezed during tough economic times. Republicans, who now hold the power in Congress, are accusing the president of seeking to revert to tax-and-spend policies that will harm the economy while failing to do anything about soaring spending on government benefit programs. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

President Barack Obama wants to create a new government agency dedicated to keeping the nation's food safe.

The proposal in the president's budget released Monday comes after outbreaks of illnesses linked to chicken, eggs, peanuts and cantaloupe in recent years. More than a dozen federal agencies oversee food safety, and consumer advocates have long called for bringing all those functions together in a single home.

Currently, the Department of Agriculture oversees the safety and inspections of meat and processed eggs and the Food and Drug Administration oversees safety of most other foods. The split oversight is often complicated—the FDA would be responsible for the safety of a frozen cheese pizza, for example, but USDA takes over part of the duties if the pizza has meat on it.

USDA inspects meat daily as it is processed, while the FDA generally conducts inspections every few years. The two agencies share inspection duties at the border. And several other agencies have small pieces of food safety oversight—from the Commerce Department to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The budget proposes consolidating the Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service and all of FDA's food safety oversight into one new agency within the Department of Health and Human Services. The new agency also would coordinate with state and local health departments, a job that is now mostly handled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the budget proposal, the Obama administration says the current system's "fractured oversight and disparate regulatory approaches" cause confusion. Consolidation "is an essential step to reforming the federal food safety system overall," it says.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the proposal is an attempt to persuade Congress to give the Obama administration authority to reorganize the agencies. Details—such as which of the 15 federal entities that have some food safety oversight would be transitioned to the new agency—could be worked out later. He said change is needed to reduce the possibility of miscommunication between agencies and to lower government overhead costs.

"The purpose of this is to begin the discussion and begin the debate," Vilsack said.

The administration said the agency would be based at HHS, not USDA, because food safety and foodborne outbreaks are public health concerns consistent with the larger mission of the department.

The changes are likely to meet opposition on Capitol Hill. Many in the food industry have long opposed a shift, fearing increased oversight, and those companies have powerful allies in the new Republican Congress.

Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts, R-Kansas, signaled immediate opposition.

"In this tough economy, the last thing producers and consumers need is more red tape," Roberts said of the proposal.

Some consumer groups said the proposal didn't go far enough. Christopher Waldrop of the Consumer Federation of America said his group supports a new food safety agency that would be independent of both HHS and USDA. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., and Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., have introduced legislation that would call for an agency that would be formed outside of both departments.

"HHS is a massive organization," Waldrop said. "A new food safety

agency would be lost among the other priorities of the department, and would likely not receive the recognition or resources necessary for it to be effective."

In 2010, Congress passed a sweeping food safety law that gave the government new powers to inspect processing plants, order recalls and impose stricter standards for imported foods. It also requires stricter food safety standards on farms and in manufacturing plants.

That law only applied to the Food and Drug Administration, which is still struggling to put the standards in place after pushback from some farmers and food companies.

The FDA's Michael Taylor, deputy commissioner for foods, said on a call with reporters Monday that the idea of a single food safety agency is "an extremely complex subject." He said the FDA is currently focused on putting the food safety law in place.

"It kind of depends on how it's done," Taylor said of a food safety agency.

The CDC estimates that there are 48 million foodborne illnesses a year from contaminated foods.

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Citation: Obama proposes new agency to make Americans' food safer (2015, February 2)
retrieved 28 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-02-obama-agency-americans-food-safer.html>

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