

Food safety reform on faster track, with Obama's backing

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Creation of a new Food Safety Working Group, announced by President Obama in his weekend radio address, moves in the direction charted by a National Academy of Sciences committee more than a decade ago but largely ignored by two previous administrations. That 1998 report said that “a centralized and unified federal framework is critical to improve the food safety system.” Obama’s inter-agency task force, to be chaired by the secretaries of health and human services and USDA, is charted to “advise the president on improving coordination throughout the government [and] examining and upgrading food safety laws.”

The changes in food safety regulation that seem most likely to find favor in Congress, with Obama’s support, were described recently by Michael Taylor, the former deputy commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration and administrator of USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service who served on the Obama-Biden transition team at agriculture. Taylor, who some consider the leading candidate to staff the White House working group, told a National Chicken Council committee meeting last month that **the reform likely would mean “fixing agencies where they sit” rather than creating a new independent agency.**

FDA is in “bad shape” and the FSIS meat and poultry inspection system is “obsolete,” Taylor said. **“We’re spending a lot of government money to do inspections that could be done by someone else,”** he said. “We need to complete the transformation of FSIS as a food safety agency, away from inspection to a science-based public health agency.” Taylor recommends that FDA have authority to require food manufacturers to write and follow food safety plans, improve its controls on imported foods and collect fees from industry to pay some of the cost.

Significantly, many members of Congress who have been pushing food inspection reform are making observations similar to Taylor’s. House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Henry A. Waxman, D-Calif., told a March 11 hearing, **“Our first goal should be to address the problems that plague this program where it currently sits.** After we finish that job, we can consider whether a reorganization is necessary, and, if so, how to go about it.” As a first step, he said that his committee would move “a strong food safety bill” in the next few months.

He hinted that he would draw from bills by Reps. Bart Stupak and John Dingell, both D-Mich., Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., Jim Costa, D-Calif., and Adam H. Putnam, R-Fla., Most proposals in Congress share the idea of mandatory pathogen prevention plants, authority for FDA to order recalls and a mechanism to track products in the event of an outbreak. There’s no consensus on how to finance an improved system but, unlike previous years, increasing “user fees” doesn’t appear dead on arrival in Congress. Some industry and public interest groups also seem more willing to consider assessments on food manufacturers.

Obama’s Saturday address was coordinated with USDA’s announcement that it’s going through with a complete ban on nonambulatory (downer) cattle slaughter for human food. The decision completes the action sought in an April 2008 petition by the American Meat Institute, National

Meat Association and National Milk Producers Federation after the publicity blitz generated by the Humane Society of the U.S. with videotape of downed cows at a California slaughterhouse. Although a downer cow isn't necessarily a food safety risk, the three trade organizations said the ban will help restore consumer confidence and help provide greater confidence to importing countries that question the safety of U.S. beef.

Previously, if cattle passed veterinary inspection at a plant and subsequently became nonambulatory, these cattle could be re-inspected to determine if they were fit for processing. Veterinarians had the authority to permit them to be processed as "suspects" and then reinspected post-mortem. Obama's announcement ended that option.

Now, cattle that become non-ambulatory disabled after federal veterinary inspection will be tagged as "U.S. Condemned" and prohibited from proceeding to slaughter, USDA said. HSUS president Wayne Pacelle said he was pleased that the government "is putting a stop to the inhumane and reckless practice of dragging and otherwise abusing downer cows in order to slaughter them for human consumption."

J. Patrick Boyle, president of the American Meat Institute, which along with other industry groups petitioned USDA in April 2008 to prohibit all non-ambulatory cattle from entering the food supply, also welcomed the government's decision. "This rule codifies voluntary industry practice since we submitted the petition nearly a year ago," Boyle said.