

America's food supply

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

America's system for guaranteeing the safety of its food supply clearly is in need of strengthening. In the past year, we have seen a 17-state outbreak of salmonella that sickened 1,300 people, and contaminated peanut butter products that sickened more than 700 people. Public health experts estimate that each year about 76 million Americans are sickened by contaminated food, and about 5,000 die. The question now is, what should be done about it?

Last week, President Obama indicated he plans to get serious about food safety by nominating two consumer-oriented physicians, Margaret A. Hamburg and Joshua Sharfstein, to head the Food and Drug Administration. Hamburg, a former New York City health commissioner who was nominated as the agency's commissioner, is a respected expert in public health and safety. Sharfstein, the current Baltimore health commissioner who, if confirmed, would be principal deputy commissioner, led the effort to limit the marketing of over-the-counter cough and cold remedies for children.

In addition to the appointments, Obama announced the creation of a panel, headed by the secretaries of Health and Human Services and Agriculture, to examine ways to streamline food safety procedures, and he asked for \$1 billion in new funding to increase the number of food inspections. Thirty-five years ago, the FDA inspected about half the nation's food processing plants. Last year, only 7,000 of the nearly 150,000 plants were inspected. Companies can hire private inspectors, which is what Peanut Corp., the Georgia company said to be responsible for the peanut butter contamination, did. But these inspectors are paid by the companies they are inspecting, creating an obvious conflict of interest and, demonstrably, an ineffective system.

In another recent food safety-related announcement, Obama's agriculture secretary, Tom Vilsack, said that "downer cattle" — those that cannot walk — would be banned completely from slaughter. This toughens meat-packing standards imposed after the Humane Society last year released film taken in a Chino, Calif., slaughterhouse showing downed animals being moved to slaughter and added to our meat supply.

Separate from administration efforts, Congress is debating two different ways to increase food safety. One is to increase the oversight responsibilities of the FDA, including giving it the ability to recall foods, which it now does not have. The other is to create a separate agency responsible solely for food safety. Under current law, a dozen federal agencies, including the FDA and the Department of Agriculture, are responsible for food inspections in the United States and abroad.

With growing numbers of the food and grocery industry behind new food-safety rules, now is a perfect time for Congress and the administration to work together make the nation's food supply safer.

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