

More must be done to keep Americans safe

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

In appointing a Cabinet-level panel on food safety, President George W. Bush took the first steps in what must be a thorough revamping of the way our food - both domestic and imported - is grown, harvested and processed to ensure safety.

While food contamination has been a problem for as long as we have eaten, the centralization of our food processing systems, particularly in the United States, means that more people can be hurt by contamination. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 76 million Americans suffer food-borne illnesses each year. Of that number, 300,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 die.

The panel that Bush formed by executive order will be headed by Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt and will include the secretaries of state, treasury and agriculture, the attorney general and other Cabinet members. It will examine the sometimes haphazard way 12 government agencies administer 35 different laws in inspecting America's food supply.

About 13 percent of the typical American's diet comes from imported foods. As the recent problems in China illustrate, setting and enforcing food safety standards will not be easy.

The Food and Drug Administration, which has the primary responsibility for inspecting imported foods, has 625 field inspectors to cover 300 ports. According to recent testimony before a House committee, an inspector in the San Francisco field office can expect to spend an average of 30 seconds inspecting a product. At that, FDA inspectors review only about 1 percent of the food products entering this country.

One way to enhance food safety would be to send more inspectors to overseas ports. Currently the Department of Agriculture, which sets standards for meats and poultry only, sends inspectors to 10 of the 150 countries that export food to the United States. That's clearly inadequate.

Because of market pressures, America's food processing system is relatively safe, though far from perfect. We are clearly exposed to danger from imports, and more resources must be devoted to their inspection.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune. CNS.

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