

Worthwhile incentives

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

With growing, well-justified concerns about how good a job it's doing monitoring the safety of our food and medications, the Food and Drug Administration is handing out more than \$8 million in employee bonuses, roughly triple what it spent five years ago, according to The Associated Press.

But while that may sound like another federal boondoggle, it makes sense. Officials say the bonuses, worth \$5,000 or more per employee, are intended to keep experienced employees from taking better-paying jobs in the private sector working for the very companies they are now asked to regulate.

With the FDA facing new challenges, in part because of the difficulty of regulating medications and food from foreign countries, having a well-seasoned work force matters.

In a commendable, albeit belated response to the problem, President Bush has created a cabinet-level committee to develop plans to guarantee the safety of food and other imports.

Not surprisingly, some members of Congress argue that the FDA bonus money could be better spent on improving food and drug safety. But that's a simplistic take.

The AP says safety center employees received just a fraction of the bonuses - \$265,000 last year. Most went to the division of the agency that approves new drugs. But officials at the Centers for Drug Evaluation and Review have complained for years about the difficulty of keeping veteran FDA employees from taking jobs at pharmaceutical companies and other places that value their technical expertise and decades of experience.

The very fact that these employees are in such high demand makes the FDA's case for trying to retain them in order to better protect the public. And, as FDA officials point out, even if the bonuses only postpone the inevitable, they still give the agency more time to develop capable replacements internally or to hire from the outside.

What's more, FDA isn't just relying on bonuses to do its job. Its 2008 budget request includes a proposal for an additional \$10.6 million and 15 additional employees to improve food safety through such things as more rapidly detecting and pinpointing food-borne illness outbreaks, more quickly intervening to reduce illnesses and deaths and deploying a system to detect high-risk imports.

The private sector routinely uses bonuses to keep its valued employees. Why should the government agency charged with keeping medications and food safe be any different?

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