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February 24, 2009

INSIDE WASHINGTON: Who's minding your food?

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So, a guy walks into a restaurant. Who makes sure his food is safe?

It depends on what he eats.

A cheese pizza that arrived at the restaurant frozen? The Food and Drug Administration is in charge of inspecting it.

A frozen pepperoni pizza? That's the Agriculture Department.

A fresh pizza, made at the restaurant? Both departments would be responsible for the original ingredients, if the pizza has meat on it. What if he eats eggs? It depends whether the eggs are inside the shell, in liquid form or have been processed. Fish? Some fish is inspected by the Commerce Department.

The FDA bears the brunt of food safety oversight, a mission called into question in the wake of a massive recall of peanut products. But at least 15 government agencies have a hand in making sure food is safe under at least 30 different laws, some of which date back to the early 1900s.

It's a convoluted system.

"There is no one person, no individual today who is responsible for food safety," said Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn. "We have an immediate crisis which requires a real restructuring."

DeLauro and Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., have been proposing an overhaul of the nation's food safety structure for more than a decade. There might now be the political will to do something following the outbreak of salmonella traced to peanuts blamed for sickening 600 people and killing at least nine others.

They may be making headway. President Barack Obama's new agriculture secretary, Tom Vilsack, said he supports creating a single, combined food safety agency. It's a major break from his predecessors.

"You can't have two systems and be able to reassure people you've got the job covered," Vilsack said.

Such a radical overhaul would be difficult. Many in the food industry have long opposed any changes,

fearing increased oversight could cut into profits. Allies in Congress have resisted new laws.

But resistance appears to be softening, the result of high-profile outbreaks of foodborne illness from domestic and foreign food sources.

Industry is open to change, said Scott Faber, a top lobbyist for the Grocery Manufacturers Association, which represents large food and beverage companies.

"The food industry recognizes that we need to give FDA new powers and new resources to address new challenges," Faber said.

Businesses are concerned about reorganizing the entire system. The priority should be strengthening the current agencies before rearranging them, he said.

The old system is an overlapping patchwork of inspections. Both the Agriculture Department and the FDA inspect shipments of imported food at 18 U.S. ports of entry. Sometimes, the FDA stores products at Agriculture Department warehouses, where they wait to be inspected by the FDA because agriculture employees aren't allowed to inspect them.

The two agencies also differ on how frequently they inspect businesses. Meat inspectors visit processing facilities daily in most cases, while FDA inspects much less frequently.

Most manufacturers of prepackaged, open-faced meat sandwiches, for example, are inspected daily by the Agriculture Department. But add a second piece of bread to make it a traditional sandwich and the FDA takes over. That means inspections probably happen once every five years, according to a study by the Government Accountability Office.

The GAO, the investigative arm of Congress, recommended two years ago that Congress re-examine the system. It said 76 million people are sickened by foodborne illness each year and 5,000 die.

But few changes have been made. And despite the salmonella outbreak, even the lawmakers urging changes say a streamlined new agency is unlikely any time soon.

A flurry of food safety bills have been introduced in Congress. Many would strengthen FDA's oversight rather than creating a single lead agency. DeLauro's bill would not combine agencies onto one. It would divide the FDA in two, separating the agency's drug oversight and food safety duties.

"We have a crisis at the moment. Let's try to address that," DeLauro said.

On the Net:

Gateway to Government Food Safety Information: <http://www.foodsafety.gov/fsg/fsggov.html>



In this April 12, 2007, file photo Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., holds up a printed page from the Food and Drug Administration's website and asserts it is confusing during a Senate Appropriations subcommittee hearing on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies on contaminated pet food on Capitol Hill in Washington. Lawmakers are pushing for a new government agency that would be responsible for food safety in the wake of a massive salmonella outbreak in peanuts. (AP Photo/Lauren Victoria Burke)



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