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March 15, 2009

President Promises to Bolster Food Safety

By [GARDINER HARRIS](#)

WASHINGTON — Describing the government’s failure to inspect 95 percent of food processing plants as “a hazard to the public health,” [President Obama](#) promised Saturday to bolster and reorganize the nation’s fractured food-safety system.

“In the end, [food safety](#) is something I take seriously, not just as your president, but as a parent,” Mr. Obama said in his weekly radio and Internet address.

Mr. Obama announced the creation of a [Food Safety](#) Working Group, which will include the secretaries of health and agriculture, to advise him on which laws and regulations need to be changed, to foster coordination across federal agencies, and to ensure that laws are enforced.

Along with Mr. Obama’s announcement, [Tom Vilsack](#), the agriculture secretary, announced that “downer cattle,” or those that cannot walk, will be banned from slaughter. In the past, cattle that passed a pre-slaughter inspection and then became injured could be sold into the food system if an inspector certified the meat as safe. This case-by-case exception system will be abandoned. Last year, only about 1,000 out of 34 million slaughtered cattle got into the food supply with such exceptions.

A bipartisan chorus of powerful lawmakers in Congress has promised to enact fundamental changes in the nation’s food-protection system. On Saturday, Mr. Obama made clear that he not only supported that legislative effort but that he also might push to expand it.

A dozen federal agencies share responsibility for ensuring the safety of the nation’s food supply, an oversight system that critics and government investigators have for years said needed major revisions.

A debate has erupted on Capitol Hill in recent months about whether to bolster food

oversight at the [Food and Drug Administration](#) or assign those responsibilities to a separate agency that would eventually absorb the food-oversight duties of the other 11 agencies, including the Food Safety Inspection Service of the Department of Agriculture. Advocates on both sides of the issue have speculated for weeks about which approach the administration would support.

Those calling for a combined food agency were heartened last month when Mr. Vilsack said that a united agency made sense and that the huge recall of products made with tainted peanuts “is a grand opportunity for us to take a step back and rethink our approach.”

In his address, Mr. Obama announced, as expected, that he would nominate Dr. [Margaret A. Hamburg](#), a former New York City health commissioner, to be commissioner of the F.D.A. and would appoint Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, the health commissioner in Baltimore, to become the principal deputy commissioner at the F.D.A.

As health commissioner in New York City, “Dr. Hamburg brought new life to a demoralized agency,” Mr. Obama said.

Thirty-five years ago, the F.D.A. did annual inspections of about half of the nation’s food-processing facilities. Last year, the agency inspected just 7,000 of the nearly 150,000 domestic food facilities, and its oversight of foreign plants, which provide a growing share of the nation’s food supply, was even spottier.

Experts have long debated whether the F.D.A. should increase inspections or rely instead on private auditors and more detailed safety rules. By calling the limited number of government inspections an “unacceptable” public health hazard, Mr. Obama came down squarely on the side of increased government inspections.

“Whenever a president uses such strong language, that’s a big, meaningful occurrence,” said William Hubbard, a former F.D.A. associate commissioner who has called for increased food inspections. “I think it’s terrific that attention is being focused on this issue.”

Each year, about 76 million people in the United States are sickened by contaminated food, hundreds of thousands are hospitalized and about 5,000 die, public health experts estimate.

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