

House moves to toughen food inspections

July 31, 2009 by DELTHIA RICKS / delthia.ricks@newsday.com



Food safety legislation that passed in the House this week marks the first official vote to pump up federal "farm-to-fork" oversight since the Great Depression, but the final word on government regulation won't come until the Senate votes in the fall.

The House bill, approved Thursday, recommends a proactive stance: preventing food contamination by stepping up inspections. It calls for inspections of high-risk facilities every six months, or at the very least, once a year. The hope is to

dramatically lower food recalls, which now seem virtually nonstop.

Last week, for instance, a California lettuce grower voluntarily recalled one lot of its romaine because of salmonella contamination. Just days ago, Haifa Smoked Fish Inc., in Queens, voluntarily recalled whitefish products because of listeria, which can trigger serious illness and sometimes death.

Deadly food-borne illnesses, caused by everything from tainted spinach to germ-laced cookie dough and contaminated peanut butter, have dashed consumer confidence and battered the nation's food supply chain.

"Consumers want safe foods, and we are tired of having to ask whether the healthy foods we're buying . . . are contaminated with deadly bacteria," said Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

She applauded the measure as a major step forward.

For years, food safety advocates have been lobbying Congress to give the Food and Drug Administration more regulatory power over the food supply, a vast and growing network crossing state lines and international borders. It's further complicated by an increasing number of imported foods that are never inspected.

The House also voted to empower the FDA to order recalls. Currently, the agency simply recommends that a company voluntarily remove its products.

"We are very pleased because this is a strong bill that includes some really critical

improvements that we fought hard for," said Jean Halloran, director of food policy at Consumers Union in Yonkers.

"It's really far-reaching in its application - if it goes through in its current form," said David Lineback, former director of the Joint Institute for Food Safety, a program of the University of Maryland and the FDA.

United Fresh Produce Association, a trade association for the produce industry, also applauded the bill. Chief executive Tom Stenzel said the legislation "will help bolster consumer confidence in the food supply."

But Halloran worries about the companion bill in the Senate, which will be debated after the August recess. "The House bill is stronger than Sen. [Dick] Durbin's (D-Ill.) bill at this point. We are hoping that a lot of the House provisions wind up in the Senate bill."

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