



# FOOD SAFETY UPDATE

## Improving the Food Safety System

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President Obama has promised to bolster and reorganize the nation's food safety system. He described the government's failure to inspect 95% of food processing plants as "a hazard to the public health."

In his address, Obama pointed out that many food safety laws have not been updated since the

Theodore Roosevelt administration. He also said the current system was too spread out over various government entities to work effectively and that the FDA is underfunded.



## President Appoints FDA Commissioners

President Obama appointed Dr. Margaret Hamburg as FDA commissioner. Dr. Hamburg comes to the FDA from the Nuclear Threat Initiative, an institute focusing on defenses against nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, where she has been vice president of biological programs since 2001. She previously served as assistant secretary for planning and evaluation for the Department of Health and Human Services. From 1991 to 1997, she held the

position of New York City health commissioner. She also served as the assistant director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases of the National Institutes of Health.

President Obama also announced the appointment of Dr. Joshua Sharfstein as principal deputy commissioner at the FDA. "As Baltimore's health commissioner, Dr. Sharfstein has been recognized as a national leader for his efforts to protect children from unsafe over-the-counter cough and cold medications," Obama said. "And he's designed an award-winning program to ensure that Americans with disabilities had access to prescription drugs."



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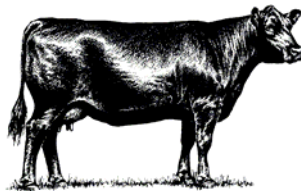
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## Other Changes to Reform Food Safety

Criticizing the Bush administration on food safety and referring to foodborne illness outbreaks linked to fresh spinach in 2006 and peppers in 2008, the president announced the creation of a new food safety working group chaired by the secretaries of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The group will coordinate with other agencies and senior officials to advise the president on improving coordination throughout the government with regard to upgrading and enforcing food safety laws.

Along with President 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 group of bi-partisan powerful lawmakers in

Congress has promised to enact fundamental changes in the nation's food-protection system. President Obama has made it clear that he not only supported that legislative effort, but that he also might push to expand it.

Thirty five years ago, the FDA 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 FDA 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, President Obama is clearly on the side of increased government inspections.

"We are also strengthening our food safety system and modernizing our labs with a billion dollar investment, a portion of which will go toward significantly increasing the number of food inspectors, helping ensure that the FDA has the staff and support they need to protect the food we eat," Obama said.

## Are Changes Necessary?

The nation is battling nearly 350 foodborne disease outbreaks a year, compared with 100 a year in the early 1990's. President Obama blames outdated laws, the diffusion of regulatory responsibilities across many government agencies, and underfunding that leaves the FDA unable to



inspect more than 5% of food processing plants and warehouses each year.

Public health experts estimate 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.

Clearly, it's time for reform.