

Government Food Safety System 'Appalling'

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FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — A crucial part of the nation's rapid-reponse plan — the ability to trace food through the supply chain during an illness outbreak or bioterrorism attack — is seriously flawed, an independent watchdog agency has found.

Federal auditors found that nearly half the food manufacturers they surveyed that are supposed to register with the Food and Drug Administration failed to give the agency accurate contact information, according to a report to be released Friday by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services inspector general's office.

Congress set up the program after the Sept. 11 attacks to keep food safe from bioterrorism and to allow quick tracebacks when contaminated food reaches consumers.

The report follows a series of high-profile food safety problems in the U.S. involving everything from disease-ridden ground beef to the largest peanut butter recall in history.

A key lawmaker called the findings "appalling."

"The weaknesses in our food safety system that are highlighted in the report are unacceptable," said U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., who chairs the House spending panel that oversees the FDA budget. "Congress should pass comprehensive food safety legislation to give FDA the statutory authority it needs."

Companies that manufacture, process, pack or hold food that is eaten in the United States are required by federal law to provide their address and basic contact information to the FDA, so investigators can follow suspect foods through the supply chain.

After interviewing managers at a sample of 130 such companies, however, government investigators found that 48 percent didn't give the agency accurate information. More than half were unaware companies had to register, and about a quarter provided no emergency contact information, because current rules don't require it.

"This lack of information may hamper FDA's ability to contact food facilities in an emergency," investigators concluded. They recommended that the FDA improve its record keeping and consider seeking stronger legal powers to fine violators.

FDA officials called the report "helpful" and said it confirmed a known set of problems in the nation's food tracing system, according to comments submitted by Deputy Commissioner Dr. Joshua Sharfstein.

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Problems with the federal government's ability to trace food drew attention last year after FDA investigators struggled for weeks to identify the cause of a salmonella outbreak initially blamed on tomatoes. No contaminated tomatoes were found, and the outbreak strain eventually was discovered in hot peppers from Mexico.

Problems resurfaced this spring during a massive salmonella outbreak in peanut products that sickened hundreds, and again last week as a California beef processor announced it would recall nearly 850,000 pounds of ground beef due to salmonella fears this year. Fresno-based Beef Packers Inc. is one of more than a dozen plants that sold meat to the National School Lunch Program, and DeLauro has called for its temporary closure while inspectors probe conditions there.

President Barack Obama's new FDA commissioner, Margaret Hamburg, has been working to restore the agency's credibility, and FDA officials repeatedly have said a skimpy budget and toothless regulations keep them from going after companies that break the rules. An agency spokesman did not return a call Thursday seeking further comment.

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