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COMMENTARY : FROM FARM TO FORK

New Congress, president should back food-safety reform
Jim O'Hara Produce Safety Project

When was the last time all 11 members of the Tennessee congressional delegation agreed on anything?

Not that long ago: July 1, 2008.

All the Tennessee lawmakers announced that day they had signed a letter to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration during the height of the salmonella Saintpaul outbreak, asking for a speedy determination of the source of the outbreak and a clear communication that Tennessee tomatoes were safe.

The point to be made is simple: Food safety is a bipartisan concern spanning the ideological spectrum.

Even more to the point: The current food-safety system is fundamentally broken, from outdated laws to a disorganized bureaucracy to a lack of resources.

Sixth District Congresswoman Marsha Blackburn summed it up in July, stating, "Americans are growing increasingly exasperated with a federal government that does not seem capable of living up to its basic responsibilities. The FDA must use this current crisis as an opportunity to restore trust."

The Obama administration and the 111th Congress will have just such an opportunity in January when they take office.

Upon taking office, President Obama can make an immediate down payment on food safety by issuing an executive order to the FDA to begin putting in place mandatory and enforceable produce safety standards, from farm to fork. Last summer's salmonella episode was only the latest in a string of produce-related outbreaks. In the fall of 2006, it was a nationwide outbreak of E. coli O:157H.

The call for federal standards has come from industry trade associations that know the current patchwork quilt of private and state safety standards is good for neither business nor their customers. The public-health community and consumer groups have pointed out that preventing contamination of produce is critical to making the case for the health benefits of eating fresh vegetables and fruits.

That down payment then needs to be followed with long term investments in food safety to address the issues of outdated laws, dysfunctional organization and inadequate funding. Sen. Lamar Alexander has already shown he understands that.

Last August, Sen. Alexander joined a bipartisan group of senators — including Democrats Dick Durbin of Illinois and Tom Harkin of Iowa and Republicans Judd Gregg of New Hampshire and Richard Burr of North Carolina — to introduce the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act.

That legislation calls for better prevention of food-borne illness by requiring food facilities to evaluate potential hazards and put in place preventive measures, and mandating that food imports meet U.S. safety standards. It provides for improved detection of outbreaks and quicker responses by improving the systems that collect and analyze data of foodborne illnesses and giving the FDA mandatory recall authority. Finally, it takes a first step toward providing a source of funding for the FDA's food-safety activities.

By joining Alexander and his fellow Senate co-sponsors when this legislation is reintroduced and working to secure its passage in the next Congress, the rest of the Tennessee congressional delegation would give real meaning to the letter they signed in July. By doing so, they would underscore the leadership role Tennessee is already playing in food safety as one of the 10 states chosen to participate in the nationwide FoodNet surveillance system and with one of its public health leaders, Dr. Tim Jones, the state's epidemiologist, active in a number of national food-safety initiatives.

Even while the delegation is working on modernizing the nation's food-safety laws and providing the FDA with adequate resources, Tennessee lawmakers can help the Obama administration address the organizational dysfunction that so exasperated Rep. Blackburn and her congressional colleagues during last summer's outbreak.

Although the FDA oversees the safety of some 80 percent of the nation's food supply, food safety has historically taken a back seat to drug and medical device issues at the agency. There is no single agency official with program responsibility and accountability for food safety. Worse still, between fiscal years 2003 and 2006, the staff for food-safety policy at the FDA declined by 14 percent and staff for inspections and enforcement fell by 11.5 percent. The agency currently estimates it inspects food facilities on average once every 10 years.

Again, the Obama administration can act immediately by reorganizing the FDA's food-safety functions and putting one person in charge who should report directly to the secretary of Health and Human Services. Tennessee lawmakers can and should add their voices to this commonsense solution.

Jim O'Hara is director of the Produce Safety Project, an initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts at Georgetown University. Before that, he was associate commissioner for public affairs at the FDA and deputy assistant secretary for health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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