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EDITORIAL

We think: Obama and Congress need to put food safety on their agenda

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There's a full plate of urgent issues awaiting President-elect Barack Obama and the next Congress. The Government Accountability Office, Congress' nonpartisan watchdog, listed 13 of them last week. Along with some obvious choices, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and oversight of the financial industry, the GAO included food safety.

The government's ability to safeguard the nation's food supply and respond quickly to outbreaks of food-borne illness are undermined by "the fragmented nature of the federal food oversight system," the GAO said. There are 15 federal agencies administering at least 30 laws; that leads to poor coordination, inconsistent policy and wasted resources.



Anyone not convinced that improving food safety is important should talk to a Florida tomato grower. During a national outbreak of salmonella earlier this year, the Food and Drug Administration initially fingered tainted tomatoes as the prime suspect. Growers in Florida and other states lost at least \$100 million in sales.

The FDA later switched to blaming contaminated peppers from Mexico. Angry tomato growers' representatives told Congress afterward that no one in the government seemed to be in charge.

The salmonella outbreak, which sickened at least 1,400 Americans, was the latest in a series of food scares in recent years tied to contaminated fresh produce, including spinach, lettuce and cantaloupes. So while the government is rightly urging Americans to eat more fruits and vegetables for good health, it's falling short in protecting produce.

The FDA, charged with ensuring the safety of 80 percent of the nation's food supply, has been underfunded and understaffed for years. That has left too few resources for inspections, enforcement and scientific research. Congress and the president belatedly began moving in the wake of the salmonella outbreak to increase the agency's budget.

But stronger laws and better coordination among regulators also are needed to adapt to today's

globalized food supply and better prevent or trace illness outbreaks. Members of both parties in Congress, including Republican Rep. Adam Putnam of Bartow, have been working together on these kinds of improvements.

In particular, the FDA needs to establish mandatory national safety standards that would apply to fresh produce from farm to fork, based on the best science available. Those national standards would replace a patchwork of state and industry standards around the country, and fill in gaps where no standards exist. They would also be applied to imported produce.

The Produce Safety Project at Georgetown University, which advocates national standards, says they could be put in place for about \$70 million. That's at least \$30 million less than the value of a tax break Congress extended last month for auto-racing track owners.

Groups representing the nation's fruit and vegetable growers have said they'd welcome the standards. They know how wide the damage from even an isolated case of tainted produce can spread.

As the Obama administration dives into the economic crisis and national security, it needs to save some room for protecting public health by making overdue improvements to food safety.

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