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Safety of food supply deserves higher priority

Today's Topic: Food safety put on back burner

Our View

As the year of the worst U.S. food emergencies in recent memory nears an end, Americans are still far from assured that their food supply is safe.

2008 saw a salmonella outbreak that sickened more than 1,400 people in 43 states and the largest beef recall in U.S. history. Those are just the headlines in a greater overall problem. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are 76 million cases of food-borne illness and 5,000 resulting deaths at an estimated cost of \$7 billion in the U.S. each year.

While it may be impossible to eradicate all food-related diseases, recent large-scale outbreaks have been traced to improper handling practices, usually at plants or wholesale distribution points. Such practices are detectable — if there are enough inspectors to do the job.

The recall of 143 million pounds of beef in February because of use of sick cattle at 11 slaughterhouses is a case in point. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service lacks "sufficient staffing levels to provide continuous surveillance" of slaughterhouses, the USDA inspector general said this week.

The problem is similar at the Food and Drug Administration, which is supposed to oversee produce and other foods, including imports. Funding for such federal agencies has been flat or reduced in recent years, even while the need for food inspection has grown with the population and the increased number of suppliers.

Swift action by lawmakers earlier this year would have made sense; but then, this was the 110th Congress, crippled by waffling House and Senate leadership and a White House opposed to lengthening government's reach — at least, until it got involved in rescuing financial houses.

Now, the economic crisis threatens to stall or undo efforts at food-safety reform. Amid a credit freeze and spiraling unemployment and home foreclosures, food safety has fallen off the radar.

This concerns the Government Accountability Office, which last month included food safety on a list of "13 urgent issues" that the incoming Obama administration and 111th Congress should address.

For years, the U.S. has needed sweeping change in how it oversees its food supply. The salmonella outbreak in June-July and the E. coli outbreak in fall 2006 show how quickly a food-borne pathogen can spread. But it will be difficult to focus attention on the problem with Washington fixated on bailouts and shifting political fortunes.

Meanwhile, food-safety officials and industry groups should work together to boost safety. The Produce Safety Project at Georgetown University is pushing for adoption of fresh-produce guidelines that were proposed by FDA shortly after the E. coli breakout, but rejected by the Department of Health and Human Services. The cost would be \$76 million over three years, minuscule compared to an investment-firm bailout.

In addition, individual states and producers in those states must do what they can to improve conditions. Farmers worked to get standards in place in California for leafy greens and in Florida for tomatoes. Obviously, nationwide improvements are needed, because so much food crosses state and national boundaries. But as with environmental standards, states should act in their citizens' interest when Washington stumbles.

And, if you are concerned about your family's safety, let your representative know that food reform cannot wait.
