Reforming Food Safety

Current Status:
Annually, 48 million Americans suffer from foodborne illnesses. These illnesses send 128,000 people to the hospital and kill approximately 3,000.¹ Virtually all of these illnesses could be prevented if the right measures are taken to improve the U.S. food safety system.

Why Reforming Food Safety Matters:
- Every year, approximately one million Americans who are stricken with foodborne illnesses will suffer from long-term chronic complications.²
- Salmonella infections, which are responsible for an estimated $365 million in direct medical costs annually, have not decreased over the past 15 years and have increased by 10 percent recently.³

Recommendations:
- Fully fund and implement the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Food Safety Modernization Act: Although the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act passed in 2011, the White House has yet to finalize key rules to implement the law, including preventive controls for food and feed facilities, produce safety, and a foreign supplier verification program.⁴ Congress and the Administration should also provide enough funding to FDA, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and relevant state agencies to be able to implement and enforce the law.
- Improve inspection capacity: There are insufficient resources to support enough inspectors for foods regulated by FDA, and there is not enough authority for FDA to have oversight over state and third party inspections.
- Move toward a unified government food safety agency: The federal government currently does not have a coordinated, cross-governmental approach to regulating food safety. Right now, food safety activities are siloed across a range of agencies, and many priorities and practices are outdated. As a first step, food safety functions should continue to be unified within the FDA, and a plan with a set timeline should be developed to restructure food safety regulatory functions across the federal government into a single, unified food safety agency to carry out a prevention-focused, integrated food safety strategy. In addition, plans should include ensuring strong scientific research and outbreak investigation activities, and that these activities are used to help inform regulation and policies.
- Examine an industry user-fee model for food safety: User fees for food and beverage industries, similar to those employed for drugs and devices at FDA, should be reviewed as a potential new model for raising additional resources to support modernized, more efficient food safety inspection practices.
- Improve surveillance of foodborne illnesses: Currently, foodborne illnesses are radically underreported in the United States and the quality of reporting varies dramatically by state. New standards and requirements should be put in place to incentivize states to improve reporting and penalize states for underreporting. Surveillance for foodborne illness outbreaks should be fully integrated with other health information technology (HIT) systems to improve tracking and identification of scope of problems as well as sources of outbreaks. FDA and CDC should also have a plan requiring clinics to send cultures from rapid response tests showing problems to public health labs to allow for subtype pathogen testing.
▲ **Curb overuse of antimicrobials in livestock and poultry:** Antimicrobials have long been used in livestock and poultry for the treatment, control and prevention of diseases, as well as to increase production. Using the same classes of antimicrobials in food-production animals and humans increases the likelihood that infections borne from infected animals will be resistant to the standard treatment protocols for humans.\(^5\) FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) must take action to drastically reduce the misuse of medically-important antimicrobials in agriculture, measure rates of use, and verify that industry is complying with all guidance and regulations.

▲ **Prevent the tainting of food by environmental contaminants:** Measures should be implemented to prevent the tainting of food by environmental contaminants, such as untreated sewage or manure that enter waters and pollute crops downstream. Requirements should be established to strengthen controls on air and water discharges of mercury and other common pollutants that are widely found in the food supply. FDA should set limits for certain contaminants, such as arsenic in rice products and apple juice.\(^6\)

**ENDNOTES**


