

How Much Is Food Safety Worth?

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In late June, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released a report entitled *Pathway to Global Product Safety and Quality* that highlighted the increasing complexity associated with regulating a globalized food system. The report underscores the importance of strengthening food safety procedures associated with imported food items by noting that in the past seven years, imported food shipments have increased by 10 percent each year.

Since the FDA cannot directly inspect every facility across the globe, the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) seeks to better ensure the safety of foreign goods by increasing accountability for importers who use foreign supplies in their processes or who sell goods produced overseas. Importers will now have a greater responsibility to verify the food safety and sanitary standards put in place by the companies with which they do business.

The report also notes that the FDA is working to build public-private partnerships with organizations that can act as third-party auditors, verifying the safety protocols and cleanliness standards in place in foreign facilities and certifying ones that pass. In addition, the FDA will rely on state and local agencies, as well as food safety agencies overseas, to aid in the inspection and certification of food manufacturing facilities.

But the FDA itself is also required to increase its global presence. The agency is charged by the FSMA to inspect 600 foreign facilities this year and to double those inspections each year. The report, however, notes that “[w]hile the goal may be attainable in the first year, it would be impossible for FDA to complete 19,200 foreign food inspections in year six without a substantial increase in resources or a complete overhaul in the way it operates.”

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While the FSMA does revamp regulations for domestic producers as well, the Act still enjoys broad industry support, as illustrated by this month's HACCP Update (p. 34), in which over 90 percent of *Food Manufacturing* readers reported a belief that the FSMA would "help increase food safety across the industry." U.S. food processors are eager to normalize food safety processes and submit their own facilities to increased scrutiny in order to build a safer food supply chain. Key to the strength of such a supply chain, however, is the assurance that imported goods are subject to the same stringent standards as domestic goods.

Despite the necessity of securing food safety across a larger sphere, the U.S. House of Representatives voted on June 16 for the 2012 agriculture spending bill, which cut \$285 million in funding to the FDA. Far from the "substantial increase in resources" that the FDA was hoping for, the cut means an uncertain future for the FSMA.

Defunding this Act, however, will not make it go away; it will simply ensure confusion and chaos. The FSMA is still law, and is therefore still enforceable. Under the Act, the FDA can still compel recalls for food manufacturers who refuse to pull tainted products from store shelves; it can still block imports from countries or companies who bar entry to inspectors; it can still mandate HACCP planning across the food manufacturing industry. But without proper funding, it will only be able to do so in a slapdash, haphazard fashion, selectively (or randomly) choosing to inspect the facilities it has the means to inspect.

One in six Americans is affected by foodborne illness each year; 5,000 die. And the FDA this year reported that foodborne illness costs the U.S. \$152 billion annually. While no piece of legislation will ever completely eradicate foodborne disease and contamination, developing a system that takes into account the diversification and globalization of the supply chain is an important step to mitigating these outbreaks. Properly funding such an initiative is key to its success.

What's your take? Let me know at krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com [1].

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