U.S. House Rejects Food Safety Bill

Mary Clare Jalonick Associated Press Writer - July 29, 2009

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The House defeated a far-reaching food safety bill Wednesday after farm-state lawmakers complained it would be too invasive and others said it was pushed to the floor too quickly.

The legislation, which would require more government inspections and oversight of food manufacturers in the wake of a massive salmonella outbreak in peanuts, was considered under a suspension of House rules and needed a two-thirds vote for passage. The 280-150 vote was just a few shy of that threshold.

Democrats quickly scheduled another vote on the bill -- under normal House rules, in which only a simple majority is needed -- for Thursday.

The expedited process of suspending the rules allows limited debate and no amendments, and is usually reserved for non-controversial bills. But opponents of the legislation said the process was too rushed as most members had not been able to see the bill until early Wednesday.

At the same time, farm-state Republicans said the bill could threaten farm operations with too much government intervention.

Oklahoma Rep. Frank Lucas, the top Republican on the House Agriculture Committee, was most vocal in opposition to the bill, saying it could "add burdens to many small businesses and farms across this country."

The bill would give the Food and Drug Administration new authority to order recalls and require the agency to develop a system for better tracing the source of foodborne illnesses. The government could impose new criminal and civil penalties on those who violate the law and food companies would be required to create detailed food safety plans.

Several Democrats have pushed for tougher food safety standards for more than a decade, but the legislation gained new momentum this year in the wake of several highly publicized outbreaks, including salmonella in peanuts that sickened hundreds and was linked to shoddy practices at a peanut company in Georgia. It was one of the largest product recalls in U.S. history.

Lucas and other opponents said they were concerned the bill would give the FDA too much authority on the farm, while the Agriculture Department already has some authority over food safety.

A handful of Democrats supportive of organic farming also voted against the bill.

Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine, a former organic farmer, said she opposed the bill because it would have imposed too many burdens on small farms that are already producing food that's considered safe.

"This would require them to got through a whole other layer of tracking and bureaucracy that they are already taking care of," she said.

House Agriculture Chairman Collin Peterson, D-Minn., also had objections to the bill but said he supported it after sponsors tweaked it to appease some farm-state concerns. Last-minute changes included modifying the way a trace-back system would work, clarifying that some hard-to-trace products such as grains would not be tracked to individual farms.

The changes also exempted farms and food retail establishments from having to register with the FDA and pay a $500 annual fee charged to food manufacturers to defray the costs of the increased oversight.

Michigan Rep. John Dingell, the bill's sponsor, said after the vote that he is disheartened.

"This is also undoubtedly a disappointment to the tens of thousands of Americans who have been sickened or have lost loved ones because of unsafe food," he said.

Other recent outbreaks include contaminated spinach in 2006 and salmonella in peppers last year. The government estimates that 76 million people each year are sickened by foodborne illness, hundreds of thousands are hospitalized and around 5,000 die.

Those outbreaks have exposed a lack of resources and authority at the FDA as the embattled agency has struggled to contain and trace them. In the peanut outbreak, FDA inspectors quickly focused on the small Georgia processing plant but had to invoke bioterror laws to get lab reports that ultimately showed the company shipped tainted peanuts. Meanwhile, the agency had no authority to order a food recall.

The FDA regulates most foods, though as many as 15 federal agencies have a hand in food safety. The Agriculture Department inspects meats, poultry and some eggs.

A similar bill sponsored by Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., has not yet seen action in the Senate.

Associated Press writer Sam Hananel contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/02/2014 - 6:45am*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2009/07/us-house-rejects-food-safety-bill?qt-most_popular=1