

Report Finds FDA is 'Stretched Thin'

WASHINGTON (AP) — A new report says the Food and Drug Administration is stretched thin and needs to reorganize to better keep the nation's food safe.

The report released by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council Tuesday says the agency needs to become more efficient and better target its limited dollars to prevent foodborne illness outbreaks. The 500-page report says the FDA lacks the vision necessary to protect consumers.

Robert Wallace, chairman of the committee that authored the report, said the FDA is too often reactive and not focused enough on prevention. The report recommends the agency focus on preventing outbreaks in the riskiest foods rather than tackling problems on a case-by-case basis.

"As recent illnesses traced to produce underscore, foodborne diseases cause significant suffering, so it's imperative that our food safety system functions effectively at all levels," said Wallace, who is a professor at the University of Iowa's College of Public Health.

Many of the report's recommendations would be met under food safety legislation passed by the House last year. That includes giving the agency greater authority in many areas, such as the ability to force a company to recall a tainted product. Under current law, the agency must negotiate with businesses when they believe a recall is necessary.

Senate leaders have said they hope to consider a similar bill this summer. Food safety advocates have been pushing the legislation for the last year as outbreaks in peanuts and raw cookie dough sickened many last year and the recent discovery of salmonella in alfalfa sprouts and E. coli in lettuce have caused new illnesses.

FDA commissioner Margaret Hamburg said in a statement that the agency is still reviewing the report, but noted the FDA is engaged in a "long-term, strategic transformation of our foods program," including the newly-created position of a deputy commissioner for foods.

"The report clearly highlights the need for enactment of pending legislation that provides much needed authorities and resources to assist in our efforts to ensure the safety of our nation's food supply," she said.

The FDA is responsible for ensuring the safety of about 80 percent of the nation's food supply, including seafood, dairy products and fruits and vegetables. It is responsible for more than 150,000 food facilities, more than a million restaurants and food establishments and more than two million farms, according to the report.

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The Agriculture Department oversees the safety of meat, poultry and some egg products. At least 15 government agencies have a hand in making sure food is safe under at least 30 different laws, some of which date back to the early 1900s.

The report recommends that the government improve coordination with state food safety agencies and move toward creating a single food safety agency to combine all of those efforts. In the meantime, the committee recommended a centralized, independent "risk-based analysis and data management center" free from political forces that could conduct rapid assessments of food safety risks and make policy recommendations.

The Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council are part of the National Academies, an independent organization chartered by Congress to advise the government on scientific matters. They were directed by Congress in 2008 to study gaps in the FDA's food safety system.

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