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FDA Food Inspections Are Seen as Inadequate

By JANE ZHANG
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WASHINGTON -- Congressional investigators are expected to tell a House subcommittee today that the Food and Drug Administration's ability to ensure the safety of the U.S. food supply is "minimal" and agency plans to overhaul its inspection regime could make a bad situation worse.

FDA officials, under fire for the recent string of high-profile food scares involving both domestic and imported foods, have been asked to appear before a House Energy and Commerce investigations subcommittee hearing to discuss the agency's food inspections.

Committee staff reviewed the system extensively and found that a shrinking inspection staff examines less than 1% of all imported food. A typical inspector in the FDA's San Francisco office examines nearly 1,000 food entries a day -- roughly one every 30 seconds, the committee report found. The agency, it says, allows importers to take possession of their high-risk goods and arrange for testing by a private laboratory. Before melamine-contaminated pet food killed and sickened thousands of pets, the FDA had never inspected those ingredients from China.


The FDA is trying to reorganize its field operations, but the report says some of its measure may backfire. Only a small percentage of its senior scientists are willing to be transferred if the agency closes seven of 13 laboratories. And in boxes of documents delivered to congressional investigators to explain the reasoning behind the closures, the agency didn't appear to have conducted any cost analysis.

The committee investigators also raise questions about the adequacy of the FDA's mostly voluntary approach to domestic and imported food. Because of lack of authority, FDA inspectors had been refused by some companies to access their records and test results. With the exceptions of several food categories, "FDA has no rules governing testing protocols, record retention...manufacturing, quality assurance and control, or the right to examine any records that a food-processing firm chooses to keep voluntarily," the report said.

The report was based on reviews of documents, interviews with industry experts and current and former FDA employees. Investigators also visited FDA laboratories and field offices.

The report, part of today's hearing, comes as Democrats are critical about how the White House has handled food safety. Funding for the FDA's food program has been stagnant, and the agency's effort to fix problems has been limited by funding shortfalls, bureaucratic delays and lack of political will.

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FDA spokeswoman Julie Zawisza said the agency hasn't seen the report, but its senior officials, including Commissioner Andrew C. von Eschenbach, will testify. "We look forward to addressing the issues the committee will raise."

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