

“Congresswoman proposes FDA restructuring”

By ARIEL OLSON-SUROWIDJOJO

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(Written on deadline)

Congresswoman and longtime public health advocate Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., outlined new legislation regulating federal food safety standards in a speech at George Washington University on Wednesday. Her proposal, which has not yet been presented to Congress, calls for the creation of an independent Food Safety Administration and mandatory recall authority for federal food safety agencies.

“We have an opportunity to reform food policy,” DeLauro said in her address. “And I’m sure we can do it in a way that will benefit consumers, government and industry.”

The proposed Food Safety Modernization Act would:

- Create a separate Food Safety Administration responsible for overseeing the food safety regulations currently administered by the FDA.
- Establish a Commission of Food Safety and Nutrition Policy responsible directly to the Secretary of Health and Human Services.
- Rename the FDA the Federal Drug and Device Administration, or FDDA.

DeLauro also expressed concerns about unregulated food imports from foreign countries, a lack of FDA funding and ineffective administrative oversight to the audience of about 100 health experts, FDA officials and food safety advocates.

Issues related to food safety have garnered widespread public attention in recent months as a result of a series of recalls ranging from the recent contamination of 21.7 million pounds of ground beef, recalled last weekend, to various foods and products imported from China. This year alone, the FDA was forced to recall imported pet food, fish, toothpaste and Vitamin C believed to contain poisons, toxins and other harmful ingredients.

“It has become evident that China continues to face serious gaps in its own food and drug safety system,” DeLauro said in a similar address in Chicago, Ill., on Monday. “Now we’re beginning to experience the consequences.”

Last year, China exported more than \$4.2 billion worth of food and agricultural products to the United States, according to DeLauro, making the nation a strong and rapidly growing contender for the United States’ consumer market.

Once the food arrives in the United States, the FDA only checks about 1 percent of the products it receives, according to spokesman William Hubbard of the Coalition for a Stronger FDA, a Washington-based non-profit.

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“The growth in imported food in the United States has skyrocketed. [The FDA doesn’t] have the staffing to keep up with the flood of imports. Our paradigm needs to shift from putting all the responsibility on the FDA, at the border, to inspect when food arrives here; to putting more responsibility on the exporters in China, or wherever, to inspect the food before it’s ever put on the boat.”

DeLauro said her proposed legislation will streamline government bureaucracy, enhance public visibility of food safety issues and increase funding for federal food safety programs and inspections.

But, while most of Wednesday’s audience applauded DeLauro’s proposal for FDA restructuring, some expressed uncertainty about the feasibility of creating an independent Federal Food Safety Administration.

“I think it’s best to take small steps,” said Madhusha Dissanayake, an attorney at Buc and Beardsley, a local food and drug law. “When you create one agency to accomplish something, it’s going to take forever just to get the organizational infrastructure in place.”

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