

[\[Previous Story\]](#)[\[Next Story\]](#)

Changes Suggested For Food Safety System

Clinton Administration says current system is working, with modifications, but some say a complete overhaul is needed

Julie L. Grisham

C&EN Washington

Although the U.S. has the safest food supply in the world, most experts agree it could be made much safer by strengthening the science behind the regulations. Issues related to food safety are becoming more important because Americans are eating more imported food than ever before and are increasingly eating food prepared outside the home. In addition, according to Donna E. Shalala, secretary of the [Department of Health & Human Services \(HHS\)](#), nearly one-quarter of the U.S. population--especially those who are very young, very old, or have compromised immune systems--is now considered to be at high risk for exposure to foodborne pathogens.

Food safety encompasses areas of research as diverse as looking at how the increased use of antibiotics in livestock may lead to more virulent strains of bacterial contaminants, studying how the cumulative effects of pesticide residues on produce and grains and in drinking water may be harmful to children, and analyzing the long-term effects of genetically modified foods. And new technologies are being developed to monitor and track down outbreaks of foodborne illness.

Twelve different groups within the federal government currently are responsible for enforcing a patchwork of 35 different laws that make up the food safety system. The system has a total budget of more than \$1 billion per year, and about three-quarters of that money goes to the [Department of Agriculture](#). In addition, state and local agencies and industry are active participants in ensuring that the food supply is safe.

Sidebar: [Twelve different groups oversee federal food safety system](#)

Members of the Clinton Administration and representatives from industry say that the current system is working and that--with the development of a strategic plan to strengthen research and development and improve coordination--it can provide adequate oversight to address concerns about the food supply. But consumer groups, some members of Congress, and others say the existing system cannot be fixed and are pushing for establishment of a new, independent food safety agency. They say an all-encompassing agency especially is needed to more efficiently monitor and report outbreaks of foodborne illness.

[Sen. Richard J. Durbin](#) (D-Ill.) recently introduced the Safe Food Act of 1999, [S. 1281](#), which would establish an independent agency to oversee all areas of food safety. The act also was introduced in the House as [H.R. 2345](#). Earlier this month, the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring & the District of Columbia held a hearing to discuss overlap and duplication in the federal food safety system.



Durbin

Durbin, the subcommittee's ranking member, said at the hearing that fragmentation in the food safety system has been discussed for more than 20 years but that very little has been done about it. He said the system should be driven by science, not politics. Competition among agencies has "created gridlock," he said, and bureaucracy has caused the agencies involved in food safety to lose sight of the real goal--protecting human health.

Durbin pointed out the disparities in the way different foods are regulated, noting that processors of foods regulated by the Food Safety & Inspection Service at USDA--such as meat, poultry, and some eggs--are inspected daily, whereas processors of foods regulated by the [Food & Drug Administration](#)--which oversees most other foods--are inspected on average once every 10 years. And he said food safety is more than a public health issue; it is also an important trade issue. He said the European Union doesn't have a strong agency such as USDA or FDA that people trust, and that a single science-based agency in the U.S. would help to gain that trust when U.S. products are sold in Europe.

In his testimony, Lawrence J. Dyckman, director for food and agriculture issues at the [General Accounting Office \(GAO\)](#), said the current system, which was patched together over many years to address specific threats, is hampered by inconsistent and inflexible oversight, inefficient resource use, and ineffective coordination. GAO has backed establishment of an independent food safety agency for many years.

The Clinton Administration, however, supports the current system. Jane E. Henney, commissioner of FDA, told the subcommittee that the [President's Council on Food Safety](#)--which was established last August and is cochaired by Shalala, Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, and White House Office of Science & Technology Policy (OSTP) Director [Neal F. Lane](#)--is working to create a seamless science-based system.



[Photo by Peter Cutts]

Henney listed some of the Administration's recent accomplishments in improving food safety, including establishment of FoodNet, a network for responding to new and emerging foodborne diseases, and PulseNet, a system that enables DNA fingerprinting of pathogens that cause foodborne illness and thus allows researchers to trace outbreaks back to their sources. She also said that in the past few years there has been increased communication among the different government agencies responsible for food safety, especially among people doing research and collecting data in the field.

Catherine E. Woteki, undersecretary for food safety at USDA, admitted at the hearing that if she had to design a food safety program from scratch, it would not look like the current system. But she said the current system meets the requirements of the law. She noted that creation of the Office of Food Safety at USDA in 1994 reduced the conflicts of interest between the areas of USDA responsible for regulation and marketing. She also said there has been much more emphasis on R&D, and those activities now are paying off.



Woteki (above) and Henney

Last summer, a congressionally mandated report from the National Academy of Sciences made several recommendations for improvements to the federal food safety system. The report, "[Ensuring Safe Food: From Production to Consumption](#)," said the food safety system should be based on science; Congress should rewrite the statutes so that inspection, research, and enforcement are based on scientifically supportable risk assessment; a comprehensive national food safety plan should be developed; and a unified, central framework for managing food programs should be established with a single official controlling all food safety resources.

Woteki noted in her testimony that the NAS report suggested several different approaches for setting up a centralized food safety system: establishing a food safety council with representatives from different agencies and a central chairman appointed by the President, designating one current agency as the lead agency, establishing a single agency reporting to one current Cabinet-level secretary, or creating a new independent agency at the Cabinet level.

The President's Council on Food Safety was set up in response to the NAS report. In addition, last month, the council announced a blueprint for a plan to create the Joint Institute for Food Safety Research, which will be a clearinghouse for all research related to food safety.

At a council meeting in July, OSTP's Lane said the role of the institute will be to coordinate research within government and to work with universities and industry. "In addition to research conducted by USDA, HHS, and the Environmental Protection Agency," Lane said, "the institute will reach out to agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the Departments of Energy and Defense" to take advantage of their work. HHS and USDA will have joint leadership of the institute, and existing funds will be used to support it. Setting up a database to track and monitor food safety research will be one of the institute's first tasks, Lane said.

The institute will be a "virtual" one, meaning that there is no plan to build any new buildings to house it. According to the plan, the staff will number no more than 10 employees. The council currently is recruiting an executive director, someone who is "a nationally recognized expert in food safety," according to Lane. Other staff will be full-time USDA and HHS employees assigned to the institute. "We hope to get the institute up and running within the next few months," Lane said.

But Durbin told Henney and Woteki at the hearing that he thinks "virtual reality" means you believe that you're doing something you're not really doing. He said he wants a real agency to oversee food safety.

Several consumer groups supporting Durbin testified at the hearing. Carol Tucker Foreman, director of the Food Policy Institute at the [Consumer Federation of America](#), Washington, D.C., and a former assistant secretary at USDA, said that the Administration has chosen to duck the most important of the NAS recommendations. She said ad hoc efforts such as the President's council do not present adequate protection and do not use resources well.

Caroline Smith DeWaal, director of food safety at the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), Washington, D.C., said in her testimony that although new technologies and systems of preventive controls have the potential to enhance the safety of food, such benefits will not be fully realized until the underlying regulatory systems are modernized as well.

Industry groups represented at the hearing, however, supported the Administration's plan to work within the current system. Rhona Applebaum, executive vice president for scientific and regulatory affairs at the [National Food Processors Association](#), Washington, D.C., said although there are ways to improve the current system, it is not accurate to say that system is broken and needs to be replaced completely.

Stacey Zawel, vice president for scientific and regulatory policy at the [Grocery Manufacturers of America](#), Washington, D.C., said the diversity of players in the current system adds a range of experience that is needed to address the multifaceted challenges being faced. She said the strategic plan currently being developed by the President's council will create a single, comprehensive plan to unify the national food safety system.

Last month, the council held a public meeting to discuss details of that strategic plan. The task force working on the plan is cochaired by Woteki and Henney. Representatives from EPA, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, and several other government agencies also are involved. Although issues related to microbial contamination of food will be the primary focus, the plan also will address chemical contamination, pesticide, and food-additive issues, among others.

The plan's overarching goal is "to protect public health by significantly reducing the number of foodborne illnesses through science-based and coordinated regulation, inspection, enforcement, research, and education programs," according to a draft.

Five goals make up the strategic plan: to ensure the development and use of a scientific and technological knowledge base to support a food safety program; to improve the effectiveness of surveillance, outbreak investigation, and response; to identify and manage food safety risks; to ensure that all people who come into contact with food from farm to table are informed of risks and preventive measures; and to create a national and--to the extent possible--international seamless food safety system.

Working groups for each of the five goals already have met several times; they will continue to meet and work out the final wording and objectives for each goal. Several additional public and stakeholder meetings will be held over the next several months, and the task force plans to issue the final report to the President by July 2000. ▶

[\[Previous Story\]](#)[\[Next Story\]](#)