

Government tightening food safety standards

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WASHINGTON (AP) — New safety standards aimed at reducing salmonella and E. coli outbreaks are part of a government effort to try to make food safer to eat.

A food safety panel established by President Barack Obama developed the new rules for eggs, poultry, beef, leafy greens, melons and tomatoes as well as for better coordination and communication among the agencies overseeing the nation's food supply.

The panel was to announce Tuesday that the Food and Drug Administration and the Agriculture Department would adopt the standards, which follow a string of breakdowns in food safety.

Earlier this year a massive salmonella outbreak in peanut products sickened hundreds, was suspected of causing nine deaths and led to one of the largest product recalls in U.S. history. In the past month, Nestle Toll House cookie dough and 380,000 pounds of beef produced by the JBS Swift Beef Co. of Greeley, Colo., have been recalled due to connections with outbreaks of E. coli.

In March, Obama said he would create a special advisory group to coordinate antiquated food safety laws and recommend ways to update them. The FDA does not have enough money or workers to conduct annual inspections at more than a fraction of the 150,000 food processing plants and warehouses in the country, Obama said.

Under the new rules:

—The FDA will help the food industry establish better tracing systems to track the origins of a bacterial outbreak.

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—A new network will be established to help the many agencies that regulate food safety to communicate better.

—Egg and poultry producers will have to follow new standards designed to reduce salmonella contamination.

—The Food Safety Inspection Service, the Agriculture Department agency that inspects meat, will increase sampling of ground beef ingredients in an effort to better find E. coli contamination.

—The FDA will recommend ways that producers of leafy greens, melons and tomatoes can reduce disease strains, and require stricter standards in those industries within two years.

—The FDA and the Agriculture Department also will create new positions to better oversee food safety.

The Agriculture Department inspects meat and poultry, and shares inspections of eggs with the FDA. The FDA inspects most other foods, but at least 15 government agencies are a part of the food safety system.

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On the Net:

Food and Drug Administration: <http://www.fda.gov/>

Agriculture Department: <http://www.usda.gov/>

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