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White House & Congress join forces to reform food safety

By Jon H. Harsch

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Two former Midwestern governors now serving in President Obama's Cabinet launched the White House's new Food Safety Working Group (FSWG) Wednesday morning. The launch carries out the promise President Obama made last March when he explained that the working group "will bring together Cabinet secretaries and senior officials to advise me on how we can upgrade our food safety laws for the 21st century; foster coordination throughout government; and ensure that we are not just designing laws that will keep the American people safe, but also enforcing them."

The FSWG began work on Wednesday when former Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, now Secretary of the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), former Iowa Gov. Secretary Tom Vilsack, now Secretary of Agriculture (USDA), and House and Senate members addressed some 100 officials from HHS's Centers for Disease Control (CDC), HHS's Food and Drug Administration (FDA), USDA's Food Safety & Inspection Service (FSIS), and the other ten government agencies dealing with different aspects of food safety.



Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) addressing Cabinet Secretaries Sebelius and Vilsack and members of the new White House Food Safety Working Group. Photo: Agri-Pulse.

As FSWG co-chair along with Sec. Vilsack, Sec. Sebelius told the opening session that “Tom and I served as governors together and I can guarantee you we come from states, Iowa and Kansas, which take a safe and secure food supply very seriously.” She pointed out that “Food safety has been a top priority for both HHS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, but the two agencies have never really worked together in a collaborative fashion as intensively and cooperatively as we’re working together now under the direction of President Obama.”

Sebelius said that 5,000 deaths and countless illnesses every year from incidents such as the recent large recalls of spinach, peanut products, pistachios, peppers, mushrooms, and alfalfa sprouts “have serious implications for public health” and “raise real questions about our ability in federal agencies to monitor and keep safe our food systems and the food industry’s ability to provide safe foods to homes and restaurants.” Charging that “today’s food safety system too often responds at the back end,” she called for a prevention-based approach and said “We need a system that prevents contamination in the first place.” She said an important sign of progress is that “the President’s budget includes an historic \$1 billion for food safety activities at FDA.”

FSWG co-chair Vilsack said the FSWG is launching “a full review of the safety of our nation’s food supply.” He stressed that “The President has pledged his full support in this matter and he has charged the Food Safety Working Group with examining all aspects of our food safety system, our statutes, our regulations, inter-agency coordination, and steps that we can pursue administratively.” Vilsack said USDA has already begin by “reviewing the Federal Meat Inspection Act, looking over our existing Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point regulations, assessing our enforcement authorities, and examining how we collect data.” He added that “While we are doing a good job at USDA, we can always do better.”

In an indication that there will be more regulatory controls, Vilsack said: “We begin with a focus on prevention, the need for research and development to allow us to be aware of what harms us and standards to prevent it, not just locally but also internationally. . . We need to expand a risk-based inspection and enforcement system. We need to test for pathogens. We need an array of enforcement mechanisms, consistently applied. . . We need a rapid response to outbreaks and we need to facilitate a rapid recovery.”

Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), who has introduced bipartisan food safety legislation in the Senate (S-510) co-sponsored by Sen. Judd Gregg (R-NH), told the working group that his own long-time championing of food safety reform began 20 years ago with a constituent letter from a mother who lost her 5-year old son to *e-coli* contaminated hamburger meat. He said that letter “changed my political life.” He said he learned that repeatedly in the past “presidential nominees of both political parties were committed to food safety. . . the problem was that once they took the oath of office, they lost interest.” What’s different today, he said, is that President Obama and his Cabinet are fully committed to food safety reform as a top administration priority. He pointed out that in the past, rivalry among federal agencies and different congressional committees has blocked progress. He said “Today is the beginning of setting that rivalry aside.”

Rep. John Dingell(D-MI), another veteran champion of food safety reform, said “Food & Drug and the Department of Agriculture are doing a good job. They’re not doing a good enough job.” He predicted that “the scandals that we’re constantly seeing. . . will be continuing” until more federal attention, more personnel, and more money are devoted to food safety.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), co-founder of the Congressional Food Safety Caucus, said that in battling for food safety reform over the past 15 years, “I can recall losing in the subcommittee, losing in the full committee, and losing on the floor of the House, so we’re going to win now on this issue and I feel confident of that.” She said the problem has been that “There is no single individual at the federal level that has the overall responsibility for food safety in this country, no one with line authority, no one person is in charge that has that responsibility and accountability on the issue of food safety.” The result, she said, is 5,000 preventable deaths a year – and thousands of victims who survive food-borne illnesses but suffer from preventable lifetime medical problems.

DeLauro told *Agri-Pulse* she is confident that food safety reform finally will be achieved because there is bipartisan support in Congress and because for the first time, “the administration has put this at the front and center of its policy agenda.”

For information about and to submit comments to the White House’s new Food Safety Working Group co-chaired by the Secretaries of the Department of Health & Human Services and the Department of Agriculture, go to: <http://foodsafetyworkinggroup.gov/>

#30