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## **Harkin promises food safety bill to fix ‘unacceptable’ problems**

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Promising to “pass comprehensive food safety reform in this Congress,” Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Tom Harkin (D-IA) told a Pew Charitable Trusts Forum on Food Safety Wednesday that “Food safety in America has too often become a hit-or-miss gamble, with parents obliged to roll the dice when it comes to the safety of their kids’ food. That is both frightening and unacceptable.”

Harkin told the meeting held in Des Moines, Iowa that comprehensive reform of federal food safety programs is urgently needed. He called for switching to a prevention-based approach backed by faster response to outbreaks of foodborne illness and “effective surveillance enforcement to ensure that foods involved in an outbreak do not make it to consumers.”

The U.S. House has already passed a comprehensive food safety bill which would significantly expand federal Food & Drug Administration authority. With strong bipartisan support, H.R. 2749, the Food Safety Enhancement Act of 2009, was passed in a 283-142 vote July 30. This fall, the Senate is expected to consider a similar food safety bill introduced by Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), S.510, the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act. Both bills have been referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

Harkin said that “despite dramatic changes in our tastes, as well as in methods of production and distribution, our food safety laws have not changed. The U.S. regulatory system has failed to incorporate the latest scientific research on ways to make and keep food safe.” He pointed out a sharp contrast: “Thirty years ago, the nation had 70,000 food processors and the FDA inspectors made only 35,000 visits a year to cover these processors. Even that level of oversight was inadequate. But, today, nearly a full decade into the 21st century, we have 150,000 food processors, twice as many plants, and the problem has grown far worse. Today FDA inspectors make 6,700 visits each year, only one-fifth as many visits as was the case three decades ago.”

Also Wednesday, the Pew Charitable Trusts released a Hart Research and Public Opinion Strategies poll showing that 90 percent of voting Iowans believe the government should have more authority to improve food safety.

The poll shows support for stronger food protections is high regardless of voters' gender, income level or political affiliation. The statewide survey of 511 registered voters, conducted between August 10-12, 2009, has a margin of error of +/- 4.3 percent. Full survey results are available at [www.MakeOurFoodSafe.org](http://www.MakeOurFoodSafe.org).

Support for new safety measures follows high-profile outbreaks in recent years in which pathogens in peanut butter, pistachios, peppers, spinach and other food resulted in illnesses in people across the country – including deaths of a number of children and elderly citizens. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 76 million food-related illnesses occur annually in the United States, with 325,000 people hospitalized and 5,000 dying as a result.

“Most foodborne illnesses that result in hospitalizations and death are preventable. Despite that, one American every two hours, every day of the year perishes as a result of pathogens in the food they eat,” says Shelley A. Hearne, managing director of the Pew Health Group. “The Food & Drug Administration, which is responsible for the safety of over 80 percent of the foods we eat, does not have the tools or resources it needs to sufficiently protect the public from dangers in the food supply.”

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