

# U.S. may rethink food safety

WASHINGTON (AP) — Contending the current food safety system is too fragmented, members of Congress and consumer advocates renewed efforts Tuesday to create a single agency to inspect food and punish violators.

Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., a sponsor of legislation that would create the new Food Safety Administration, said public concern over E. coli-contaminated beef and safety of imported produce could boost support for a proposal that has failed in the past against fierce industry and bureaucratic opposition.

"We have to move beyond political clout and turf," Durbin said. "This legislation isn't about more regulation — it's about more effective regulation."

Food inspection and safety enforcement today is divided mainly among the Agriculture Department, Commerce Department, Food and Drug Administration and Environmental Protection Agency. Each has its own budget, staff and regulations.

This system contains inherent contradictions, said Rep. Vic Fazio, D-Calif.

"This legislation isn't about more regulation. It's about more effective regulation."

**RICHARD DURBIN**  
U.S. Senator

And which agency does the inspecting matters: A recent General Accounting Office audit found that USDA inspects meat, poultry and egg production facilities every day, while FDA inspects food manufacturing plants only about once every 10 years.

"This system makes no sense to the American public," said Carol Tucker Foreman, a former USDA assistant secretary who is now head of the Safe Food Coalition. "The existing arrangement is convenient for lobbyists and lawyers."

The bill would consolidate the budgets and staffs of existing food-safety functions, meaning no new money would be spent. The top officer would be like the EPA administrator, a Cabinet-level post but not a full-fledged

Cabinet member.

The legislation stops short of proposing any new food inspection practices or tougher meat recall rules, which the Clinton administration began advocating after the recall last summer of 25 million pounds of Hudson Foods Inc. ground beef produced at a Columbus plant.

Three other E.coli-contaminated beef recalls also have involved Nebraska plants since then. Two were traced to Norfolk's BeefAmerica plant, and South Korea sent back tons of IBP Inc. beef after E. coli was found on some of it.

Several industry groups reacted cautiously to the proposal but said they were willing to discuss it, a big departure from the past when most fought outright to retain the system as it is.

"If the focus is to enhance our food safety system through sound science, common sense regulations and nationally uniform standards, we welcome the initiative," said Kelly Johnston, lobbyist for the National Food Processors Association.

# Iraq agrees to wait to expel U.S. officials

BAGHDAD, Iraq (AP) — Iraq agreed Tuesday to postpone the expulsion of American weapons inspectors until after U.N. envoys finish their mission, in an apparent bid by Baghdad to take its case to end sanctions directly to the Security Council.

After an appeal by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Iraqi officials said they'd wait until after the envoys' report to the Security Council, in order to create a "positive environment" for today's mission.

Iraq had vowed to expel seven American inspectors working with the United Nations by today.

It was far from certain if the postponement, announced both in Iraq and at the United Nations, would solve anything. Iraq already has rejected the envoys' message: rescind the expulsion order against the Americans and cooperate fully with the U.N. inspectors.

But by waiting to carry through on the expulsions, Iraq appeared to be trying to get the council to address President Saddam Hussein's agenda: a deadline from the United Nations for lifting the punishing sanctions, imposed for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Annan said Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz would come to New York to argue his government's case.

The Security Council has said it will not lift the sanctions — which include an embargo in Iraq's important oil exports — until arms inspectors certify that Iraq has eliminated its weapons of mass destruction.

The crisis arose last week when Iraq announced that Americans will be barred from U.N. inspection teams on grounds they are spying and working to maintain the crippling economic sanctions.

Iraq continued that policy Tuesday, blocking for the second straight day U.N. inspectors trying to check weapons sites inside the country. Authorities reiterated they would not grant access to teams that included Americans.

Iraq also has warned that a U.S. surveillance flight scheduled for today risked triggering Iraqi anti-aircraft batteries, reportedly on alert in case of an American attack.

That brought a sharp response Tuesday from President Clinton, who warned that Saddam would be making "a big mistake" if his

troops fired on the spy planes. Defense Secretary William Cohen said the flights would go forward and threatened "serious consequences" if Iraq attacked.

Neither leader specified what the United States would do in the event of an Iraq assault, but the government has already said it would not rule out a military response to Iraq's decision to bar American inspectors.

Annan sought to end the caustic rhetoric that has characterized the dispute.

"Threats and counter-threats are not conducive to these kinds of negotiations," he told reporters. "So I appeal to everyone to restrain themselves and give the process a chance."

The three U.N. envoys are due in Baghdad today. They're expected to remain for two days before returning to brief the Security Council on Monday.

In Baghdad, some 55,000 Iraqis gathered for a soccer game at Al-Shaab Stadium that was preceded by rally with chants of "Down with America!"

Iraq's turning back of the U.N. weapons inspectors Tuesday was a repeat of Monday's action, when a missile team with at least one American was denied entry to a site.

"Today we went with our inspection teams to separate sites," said Maj. Gen. Nils Carlstrom, the Swedish head of the U.N. monitoring office in Baghdad. "All three teams were told they can continue their inspections, but without Americans."

He said the team leaders canceled the inspections and returned to headquarters.

The inspectors are part of the U.N. Special Commission, which is responsible for monitoring the elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq claims it has destroyed its weapons and dismantled the programs to build them, but U.N. inspectors repeatedly have said Iraq is withholding key information.

Also Tuesday, a high ranking U.S. State Department official, Martin Indyk, continued his tour of Gulf states seeking support for a firm U.N. stand on the dispute.

"The united will of the Security Council is that Saddam should understand that he has no alternative but to comply," Indyk said.

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