

Harkin Calls on FDA to Release Documents Detailing State Food Safety Inspections

February 05, 2009

Harkin Calls on FDA to Release Documents Detailing State Food Safety Inspections

"We saw the effects of deregulation on our financial sector, now we are seeing the impact of weak oversight on food safety inspections," says lawmaker

WASHINGTON, D.C. — During a food safety hearing before the Senate Agriculture Committee today, Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) called on the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to submit to Congress records detailing contracts with state Departments of Agriculture to conduct food safety inspections of private companies. The request came on the heels of the recall of peanuts and peanut products from the Peanut Corporation of America, which has been linked to a Salmonella outbreak that has killed eight and sickened 575, including three in Harkin's home state of Iowa.

"We know what happens when federal oversight is deregulated," said Harkin. "We saw the impact of deregulation on our financial sector and now we are seeing the impact of weak oversight on food safety inspections. To say that food safety in this country is a patchwork system is giving it too much credit. Food safety in America has too often become a hit-or-miss gamble, and that is truly frightening."

During testimony before the Committee, the FDA testified that the Peanut Corporation of America's own testing found 12 incidents of Salmonella at the plant since 2007. Under law, the company does not have to report these findings to the FDA and despite these warnings, the last time federal inspectors were sent to the company was in 2001. Instead, the FDA relied on the company to remedy the problems.

Yesterday, media reports showed a Texas company linked to Peanut Corporation, which had been contracted out to the Texas Department of Agriculture for inspection, had not been inspected by either federal or state officials for almost four years.

"FDA is increasingly relying on states to conduct food safety inspections and this system is not working. I urge the FDA to submit to Congress details of the contracts and inspection reports with individual states immediately as we work to close the gaping loopholes in our nation's food safety system," he concluded.

###