

Leahy Urges House To Consider Food Safety Accountability Act

WASHINGTON (Wednesday, June 15, 2011) – Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) is urging the House of Representatives to consider the Food Safety Accountability Act, a bill that will hold criminals accountable for those who knowingly violate food safety standards and place tainted food products on the market.

“The American people should be confident that the food they buy for their families is safe,” said Leahy. “The uncertainty and fear caused by the current E. coli outbreak in Europe only reinforces the need to pass the common sense Food Safety Accountability Act to protect our own food supply. I urge the House to quickly pass the Senate bill and join us in taking this important step toward protecting our food supply.”

The House of Representatives last year approved a provision similar to the Food Safety Accountability Act, with strong, bipartisan support. The Senate unanimously approved the legislation in April.

The Food Safety Accountability Act will increase criminal penalties for any individual or corporation that knowingly endangers American lives by contaminating the food supply by distributing misbranded or tainted food products. The legislation will increase the offense from a misdemeanor to a felony, establishing fines and giving law enforcement the ability to seek prison sentences of up to 10 years for such offenses.

“The Food Safety Accountability Act promotes more accountability for food suppliers, by increasing the sentences that prosecutors can seek for people who violate our food safety laws in those cases where there is conscious or reckless disregard of a risk of death or serious bodily injury,” Leahy said. “This bill will significantly increase the chances that those who commit serious food safety crimes will face jail time, rather than merely a slap on the wrist.”

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Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee, Floor Statement In Support Of S. 216, The Food Safety Accountability Act June 15, 2011

In April, the Senate unanimously passed the Food Safety Accountability Act. If enacted, this important bill will hold criminals who poison our food supply accountable for their crimes. Now, more than ever, it is critical that the House pass this non-controversial legislation.

A recent E. coli outbreak in Germany—identified by scientists as a new, deadly strain of the bacteria— has killed at least 35 people and spread to 10 countries. Thankfully, this particular outbreak has not yet hit the United States, but this tragedy, on the heels of several major outbreaks in the United States in recent years, highlights the importance of ensuring that we take every step to protect our food supply. The Food Safety Accountability Act promotes more accountability for food suppliers, by increasing the sentences that prosecutors can seek for people who violate our food

safety laws in those cases where there is conscious or reckless disregard of a risk of death or serious bodily injury.

Current statutes do not provide sufficient criminal sanctions for those who knowingly violate our food safety laws. Knowingly distributing adulterated food is already illegal, but it is in most cases merely a misdemeanor right now, and the Sentencing Commission has found that it generally does not result in jail time. The fines and recalls that usually result from criminal violations under current law fall short in protecting the public from harmful products. Too often, those who are willing to endanger our American citizens in pursuit of profits view such fines or recalls as merely the cost of doing business.

Last summer, a salmonella outbreak caused hundreds of people to fall ill and triggered a national egg recall. Salmonella poisoning is all too common and sometimes results from inexcusable, knowing conduct like that carefully targeted by the Food Safety Accountability Act. The company responsible for the eggs at the root of the last summer's salmonella crisis had a long history of environmental, immigration, labor, and food safety violations. It is clear that fines are not enough to protect the public and effectively deter this unacceptable conduct. We need to make sure that those who knowingly poison the food supply will go to jail. This bill will significantly increase the chances that those who commit serious food safety crimes will face jail time, rather than merely a slap on the wrist.

Food safety received considerable attention last year, and I was pleased that Congress finally passed comprehensive food safety reforms, but our work is not done. A provision almost identical to the Food Safety Accountability Act was passed by the House with strong, bipartisan support, but failed to make it into the final legislation that ultimately passed because of Republican objections in the Senate. Now that the Senate has unanimously passed this bill, it is again time for the House to act.

The American people should be confident that the food they buy for their families is safe. The uncertainty and fear caused by the current E. coli outbreak in Europe only reinforces the need to pass the common sense Food Safety Accountability Act to protect our own food supply. I urge the House to quickly pass the Senate bill and join us in taking this important step toward protecting our food supply.

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