

Judiciary Committee Approves Leahy-Authored Food Safety Accountability Act

WASHINGTON (Thursday, March 31, 2011) – The Senate Judiciary Committee Thursday approved legislation to strengthen criminal penalties for companies that knowingly violate food safety standards and place tainted food products on the market. The Committee is chaired by Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), who authored the Food Safety Accountability Act and first introduced the bill last summer.

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.

“Current statutes do not provide sufficient criminal sanctions for those who knowingly violate our food safety laws,” said Leahy. “Knowingly distributing adulterated food is 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.”

The legislation is cosponsored by Judiciary Committee members Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Al Franken (D-Minn.), Herb Kohl (D-Wis.), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Richard Durbin (D-Ill.), and Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.). The Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously approved the legislation in September 2010. Leahy had sought to include the criminal penalties bill in the broader FDA Food Safety Modernization Act, which was signed into law early this year. The bill will now await consideration by the full Senate.

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