

ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS  
**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM  
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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

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February 4, 2009

Chairman Edolphus Towns  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Towns:

I am writing to respectfully request that the Committee hold a hearing on federal food safety regulation. Many experts believe that the United States has the safest food supply in the world. While that may be accurate, annually an estimated 76 million people become sick, 325,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 people die from food borne illness.

In recent years, there has been a spate of highly-publicized and serious failures in the food safety system. In 2006, bagged spinach carrying E. coli sickened 200 people and was linked to three deaths. In 2007, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recalled peanut butter due to Salmonella contamination that resulted in hundreds of illnesses. Last year, serrano peppers from Mexico contaminated with Salmonella Saintpaul sickened 1,300 people. Additionally, there were 21 beef recalls in 2007, eight in 2006, and five in 2005 as a result of E. coli contamination. And most recently, peanut butter and peanut butter paste contaminated with Samonella has sickened over 500 and is linked to eight deaths and the recall of affected products expands daily.

As is illustrated with the current recall in which failures at a single processing plant, Peanut Corporation of America (PCA) in Blakely, Georgia, has resulted in the recall of over 800 products, the food industry continues to grow in its complexity. At the same time the federal regulatory system is fragmented and fails to share resources and expertise. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has identified 15 federal agencies responsible for administering 30 food safety related laws. The lines of jurisdiction of the various agencies can be perplexing. For example, FDA has jurisdiction over establishments that sell or serve eggs or use them as ingredients and the

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) regulates the safety of liquid, frozen, dried, and damaged eggs.

Furthermore, GAO highlighted revamping federal oversight of food safety in its 2009 high-risk series. Specifically, GAO found, “inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources,” in the regulation of food safety. The Institute of Medicine in its recent report *HHS in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* found that food safety is harmed by the current fragmented state of regulation and that, “the system remains ill-equipped to meet emerging challenges.”

While the current recall is illustrative of some of the failures in food safety, it would be foolhardy to simply focus on one scenario as opposed to the underlying structural deficiencies. It is important to consider the regulatory structure in its entirety, the globalization of our food supply, resource and technological needs, and the roles of all the various agencies responsible for maintaining a wholesome food supply. To that end, I believe this Committee is uniquely positioned to consider all facets of food regulation and request a hearing on these matters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Darrell Issa', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Darrell Issa  
Ranking Member