

Chairman Dingell at the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing titled, "Contaminated Food: Private Sector Accountability"

Statement of Congressman John D. Dingell, Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS HEARING ON "CONTAMINATED FOOD: PRIVATE SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY"
February 26, 2008

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing. Oversight of food safety is one of the most important undertakings of this Committee.

Today we will hear from leading companies in the food processing industry about what does or does not work in safeguarding our food supply. Unfortunately, we are forced to return to issues and hear from witnesses from our prior hearing last April.

At that time, ConAgra testified regarding the discovery of Salmonella in their Peter Pan peanut butter. What we did not know then, due to FDA obfuscation and delay, was that this problem was more serious than what we had been told. After the hearing, we learned that many more jars contained the deadly bacteria and some had been processed fully six months after ConAgra claimed they had fixed the problem.

Since last April's hearing, we have learned of another problem with ConAgra. Apparently, their Banquet brand pot pies have made hundreds of Americans sick, while the source of the contamination is still in doubt. ConAgra blames Butterball, which supplies the turkey for the pies. Butterball disagrees and claims their turkey is fully cooked before shipped. Ironically, the FDA has no opinion on the matter. Today, we hope those companies can clarify this issue and assure the consumer that their products are safe.

Last April, we also heard testimony about contaminated lettuce and spinach. We were assured then that the problem was under control due to the issuance of new voluntary compliance standards. Since then, however, we have had two more recalls of leafy greens.

We will hear from Dole Foods as well as from Mr. Brackett of the Grocery Manufacturers Association who recently retired as head of food safety at FDA and helped develop those voluntary standards. Suffice it to say, we have some questions about those proposals.

We also will hear from two firms where botulism has been found in their low acid canned foods. This is very unusual. It is the first time in more than 30 years that such products have been infected with botulism in this country. One of those plans even had a USDA inspector on premises full time.

We also wanted to hear from the head of the California meat packing company who recently recalled 143 million pounds of beef, including 55 million pounds destined for our school children. It appears he has refused our offer to testify voluntarily. We now will have to consider whether we need to compel his appearance to probe how on-site USDA

inspectors could have missed these safety problems and the inhumane treatment of the animals that were slaughtered there.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would also like to address the broader issue of industry responsibility. Under this Administration, we have experimented with voluntary health and safety regulations to protect our food. Yet, our food supply becomes more dangerous all the time.

It is clear our regulatory system is broken. I urge industry to provide serious recommendations and, more importantly, strongly support legislation that will ensure food safety. The time has passed for half measures or asking regulators to do more with less. Our health is at stake. If you don't join us in changing the current system, I can assure you that this will not be the last time you join us in testifying about another recall and another failure in protecting our Nation's food supply.

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce
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