

New Congress means new look at single food agency

By Alan Guebert Special to the Farm Forum

One hundred years ago this week, the nation's first extensive food safety laws went into effect. Inspired by Upton Sinclair's stomach-churning novel "The Jungle," President Theodore Roosevelt bullied Congress into passing the Food and Drug Act. Its key inventions were federal food inspections and mandatory food labeling.

A century later, consumers, food makers, farmers and ranchers will likely face a major overhaul of Roosevelt's landmark handiwork. Key food safety advocates in Congress, spurred by last year's veggie scares and November's election, promise hearings and legislation on new approaches to food safety.

The push will come from two, newly powerful Democratic members, Connecticut Rep. Rosa DeLauro and Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin.

Neither is a newcomer in public health or food safety. In 1987, then-Congressman Durbin authored the smoking ban on domestic airlines. DeLauro, a cancer survivor, is co-founder of the Congressional Food Safety Caucus.

In 2005, each introduced identical legislation in their respective chambers to create a national "Food Safety Administration." This new, single office would combine and then direct "the administration and enforcement of food safety laws," from today's tangled alphabet soup of food-watching federal agencies.

According to both, a century of new food-producing technology, rising food imports and new public health woes, has created a hydra of federal food inspection and safety agencies often working at cross-purposes.

For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has at least four sub-departments either conducting or implementing food promotion, safety, research and inspection: FSIS, GIPSA, AMS and APHIS.

Additionally, the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control, the EPA, the Federal Trade Commission, the U.S. Customs Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms have pieces of the food safety pie.

But the 2005 DeLauro-Durbin legislation, like most Democratically-proposed ideas in the then GOP-run Congress, was forwarded to the appropriate Senate and House committees for action and promptly sunk from sight.

DeLauro and Durbin, however, didn't.

Nov. 7's Democratic Capitol Hill takeover placed them and their single Food Safety Administration idea near the top of legislative heap. Durbin is now the Senate's second-in-command; DeLauro is ticketed to become chair of the House Appropriations Ag Subcommittee, the group that controls every penny of federal ag spending.

A single, national food safety agency is neither novel nor unique. A Feb. 2005 U.S. Government Accountability Office report (GAO-05-212) on seven "high-income countries where consumers have high expectations for food safety," noted that each claimed "consolidation of their food safety systems has led to significant improvements in food safety operations that enhance effectiveness and efficiency."

(The nations, which chose a variety of strategies to streamline and improve their food safety agencies, are Canada, Denmark, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand.)

USDA's reply to the GAO analysis, echoing that of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), however, pointed out the study's obvious - even to GAO - shortcomings: the smaller nations have smaller, less diverse agriculture and food sectors; the newness of their efforts precluded extensive cost-benefit analyses; America's experience and inter-agency communication ensures "the current system is working."

Those Feb. 2005 views, however, stand in stark contrast with the opinion offered by HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson in his farewell remarks when he left the Bush Administration just two months before.

"For the life of me," Thompson noted darkly, "I cannot understand why the terrorists have not attacked our food supply because it is so easy to do."

Easy or not, welcome or not, the D's - Durbin, DeLauro and the Democrats - promise another run at a single food safety agency. And this time they have the clout.