


In what have been described as landmark recommendations, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) proposed two new Food Safety Modernization Act rules today with a special emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables. 

The regulations build on once voluntary standards, establishing what FDA commissioner Margaret A. Hamburg described as "a shift from 'react and respond' to 'prevent.'"

The first rule requires a formal plan to prevent foodborne illness from products produced both domestically and abroad. Producers will also be required to develop a reactionary plan to address problems as they arise.

Part two mandates enforceable produce safety standards during production and harvest.

The FDA's deputy commissioner for foods and veterinary medicine, Michael R. Taylor, explained the Produce Safety Rule in greater depth and the intention to prevent reasonably foreseeable hazards.

"Our rule focuses specifically on microbiological standards - bacteria, e. coli, salmonella, listeria and so forth - that have been associated with illnesses related to produce. And the regulation focuses on four major pathways for possible contamination of fresh fruits and vegetables with such pathogens," Taylor said in an FDA conference call.

Pathways addressed will be water, worker and employee hygiene, material put into soil and animals that might enter growing fields.

"The produce rule also addresses conditions in packing houses where we know from experience that a product that may have grown safely in the field can possibly be contaminated or spread contamination."

Taylor explained further the scope of "fresh" under the new rule.

"We're really targeting fresh fruits and vegetables so products that go to a canning operation, for example, would not be subject to the rule. Likewise, crops like potatoes and artichokes that are traditionally cooked before preparation would not be subject to these rules because the microbial hazard is handled through that processing," he said.

The FDA anticipates further safety rules from Congress in the near future. Among them may be a foreign supplier verification program, requiring importers to ensure foreign producers have met the same modern standards as domestic producers.

Major produce associations in the U.S. have already begun preparing the industry for the proposed government changes.

Produce Marketing Association CEO Bryan Silbermann said the organization was in the process of reviewing the FDA rules.

"In the coming days we'll provide an online summary of the proposed rules and will be scheduling a free webinar for members with FDA and PMA experts. And, over the next few months, we'll read and analyze the proposed rules and work with PMA's volunteer leaders to submit commentary to the FDA. Once the FDA reviews all the comments submitted, they'll revise the rules in a final form which will include a timeline for implementation," Silbermann said in a media statement.

The United Fresh Produce Association's vice president of communications, Ray Gilmer, also specified the organization's goals in reviewing the regulations.

"The proposed rules must be: 1) commodity-specific, based on best available science; 2) risk-based; 3) consistent no matter where produce is grown or packaged, in the U.S. or imported, large or small operations; and 4) flexible to allow for advances in science and production technology. We are committed to ensuring that those critical provisions, and others, will be integrated into the final rules going forward," Gilmer elaborated in a statement.

The proposal is open to public comment for the next 120 days.

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