

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**STATEMENT BY SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY ON FOOD SAFETY CHALLENGES  
AND SAFEGUARDS FOR CONSUMERS**

*(AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY)*

In a few weeks, many of us will travel home to join our loved ones for a Thanksgiving meal that celebrates family, community, and our gratitude for the bounty that God has bestowed on our nation.

We too often take it for granted that the food we eat is safe and free from dangerous contamination. Recent outbreaks of *E. coli* and *Salmonella* have shown all too clearly that network of protections we count on to protect us from deadly foodborne illness is a frayed and inadequate patchwork.

These outbreaks are examples of a wider problem with food safety. According to the CDC, there are 76 million cases of foodborne illness every year. Most of them result only in mild symptoms, but diseases caused by contaminated food cause over 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths every year, which means that an average of 13 Americans die from a foodborne illness every day.

A few weeks ago, spinach contaminated with a deadly strain of *E. coli* made its way from farms in California into the food supply, and quickly spread to 26 states. When the outbreak was finally over, 204 individuals were infected, 102 were hospitalized, and 3 died.

The deaths of a two year old boy in Idaho and two elderly women in Wisconsin and Nebraska highlight the special vulnerability of children and seniors to these illnesses.

Many dedicated professionals in local, state and federal health agencies worked hard to respond to these outbreaks – but responding to an outbreak means that the battle is already lost. We need to learn what must be done to prevent these outbreaks from occurring in the first place.

In November 2005 – months before the recent outbreak -- FDA had sent a letter to California vegetable firms outlining “serious concerns with the continuing outbreaks of foodborne illnesses associated with the consumption of fresh and fresh-cut lettuce and other leafy greens.” That November letter wasn’t even the first warning by FDA. It reiterated concerns in a letter nine months earlier.

Despite these repeated warnings, corrective actions were not taken to prevent the subsequent outbreak. Obviously, we need to strengthen our approach to food safety.

The questions are many. Does FDA need additional authority to take action when problems are identified? Does it have the authority but lack the resources to take action? Is coordination adequate among federal agencies, and between federal and state agencies, so that prompt action can be taken when problems are detected?

Not every outbreak is foreseeable or preventable. But when there are persistent problems that have not been corrected, it is the responsibility of Congress to set things right, and that’s the purpose of this hearing.

We’ll also hear today from representatives of firms with new technologies to improve food safety, through better detection of contamination and better ways to trace the flow of food products

from farm to table. I look forward to their testimony, and to the testimony of representatives from our federal and state health agencies. We're all partners in the effort to see that the food that American families eat is safe from contamination and danger.

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