

White House Warns of Food Safety Cuts

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Impending across-the-board budget cuts could mean fewer government food safety inspections and higher prices for meat at the grocery store.

A White House memo released late last week said that one of the consequences of the federal budget cuts, known as sequestration, would be 2,100 fewer food facility inspections by the Food and Drug Administration, "putting families at risk and costing billions in lost food production." The cuts are set to take effect on March 1.

Department of Agriculture inspectors could be furloughed for up to 15 days, meaning meatpacking plants would have to intermittently shut down and there could be less meat in grocery stores.

The Obama administration, pressuring Congress to head off the cuts, warned people could get sick as a result.

"The public could suffer more foodborne illness, such as the recent salmonella in peanut butter outbreak and the E. coli illnesses linked to organic spinach, as well as cost the food and agriculture sector millions of dollars in lost production volume," the memo read.

While the USDA oversees meat safety and is required to have a constant presence at meatpacking plants, the FDA conducts infrequent inspections at manufacturing facilities for most other foods. While most food safety problems aren't found until after people get sick, a reduced number of FDA inspections would mean less vigilance overall and could have an impact on public health, advocates say.

The cuts could come just as the FDA is supposed to be putting in place a new food safety law that requires more inspections of food facilities.

"They should be hiring and training people, not reducing the number of inspections," said Caroline Smith DeWaal of the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Meatpacking industry officials immediately responded to the USDA furlough threat, saying it would devastate their industry. J. Patrick Boyle, president of the American Meat Institute, said in a letter to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack that the furloughs could be illegal because the government is required by law to inspect meat.

The Agriculture Department has an entire agency devoted to the inspections and much of that agency's budget goes to inspector salaries. While USDA says the cuts would affect those salaries, Boyle argued that cuts could be made in other areas of the Food Safety and Inspection Service. If an inspector isn't present at a

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meatpacking plant, by law the plant can't operate.

"Furloughing inspectors would have a profound, indeed devastating, effect on meat and poultry companies, their employees, and consumers, not to mention the producers who raise the cattle, hogs, lamb, and poultry processed in those facilities," Boyle said in the letter.

USDA said the furloughs could impact approximately 6,290 establishments nationwide and cost roughly over \$10 billion in production losses. Lost wages could total \$400 million. The shutdowns could limit meat supplies and lead to higher prices, the department said.

The sequestration cuts, postponed by the recent "fiscal cliff" deal, are the punishment for the failure of a 2011 deficit supercommittee to reach an agreement. The White House and congressional Democrats are hoping to find a way to avert the cuts, while some congressional Republicans have signaled that they will not oppose them.

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