

Food safety bill could aid B. C.

Local training institute stands to benefit from Senate legislation

Elizabeth Willis • *The Enquirer* • December 1, 2010

The Senate passed legislation Tuesday that could aid local efforts to ensure food inspectors are properly trained.

The \$1.4 billion bill, which could give the government broad new powers to increase inspections of food processing facilities and force companies to recall tainted food, passed the Senate 73-25. It would also place stricter standards on imported foods.

Supporters say passage is critical after widespread illnesses spread by peanuts, eggs, spinach and other produce.

Those outbreaks exposed a lack of resources and authority at the Food and Drug Administration as the embattled agency struggled to contain and trace the contaminated products. The FDA rarely inspects many food facilities and farms, visiting some every decade or so and others not at all.

The bill would emphasize prevention so the agency could try to stop outbreaks before they begin. Farmers and food processors would have to tell the FDA how they are working to keep their food safe at different stages of production.

It also allows the FDA to give grants to train food professionals, something the International Food Protection Training Institute has been working to standardize since it opened in Battle Creek in March 2009.

"It's good that the bill has recognition that training is important," IFPTI Executive Director Gerald Wojtala said. "We would just expect that as the FDA's leading partner, we would be there to support their training."

President Barack Obama praised passage of the bill and urged the House to act quickly on the legislation.

"We are one step closer to having critically

important new tools to protect our nation's food supply and keep consumers safe," he said.

The bill's prospects are still unclear because there is little time during the brief lame-duck congressional session for the House and Senate to reconcile different versions.

Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin, the sponsor of the Senate legislation, said he has agreement from some members in the House to pass the Senate bill, which would send the legislation straight to the president's desk.

Language was removed in the Senate version that would have specifically benefited Battle Creek's IFPTI. Instead, the final version includes provisions that allow agencies such as the IFPTI to receive FDA training grants.

U.S. Rep. Mark Schauer, D-Bedford Township, said it was an acceptable compromise and that he would support the Senate version of the bill to get it to the president's desk on time.

"It's more general language, but I'm satisfied with it," he said. "Frankly, there were other versions under consideration that would have made it very difficult for the IFPTI to be funded.

"It's not as specific as the House version but it's good enough and I think it's good news."

The Associated Press contributed to this report. Elizabeth Willis can be reached at 966-0684 or ewillis@gannett.com.