

March 3, 2006 - New Act Undermines Safety of Consumers

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National Uniformity Act Will Replace 200 State Food Safety Laws With Weaker Federal Standard

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today strongly criticized the National Uniformity for Food Act (H.R. 4167), which passed the House by a vote of 283-189. Rep. Slaughter said the Act was an assault on the health of American consumers and a blatant give-away to the food industry.

"All the Food Uniformity Act will do is give us uniformly low food safety standards nation-wide," Rep. Slaughter said.

H.R. 4167 will grant the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the power to replace state laws regulating what information is provided to consumers about the food they purchase. A national, FDA-established standard will be put in their place, one which will likely be lower and offer fewer protections than state standards.

"State officials do 80 percent of the work that keeps our food safe. They are the experts," Rep. Slaughter said. "Why on earth would we want to make them subject to a group of FDA bureaucrats who have proven that they can't keep this country safe?"

"This bill will discard more than 200 state food safety laws," Rep. Slaughter said. "It will send quality state regulations that are protecting American families into a bureaucratic black hole."

No committee hearings were held on H.R. 4167, and state and local public health officials were not consulted about how the legislation would affect their communities. Both the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture and the Association of Food and Drug Officials wrote the bill's sponsor expressing their opposition to it, along with their willingness to work with Congress. Their offers were denied.

The complete text of Rep. Slaughter's remarks made on the floor of the House regarding the bill, as prepared, can be found below:

M. Speaker:

The bill before us addresses a fictional problem. Simply put, the nation's largest food companies think states are giving consumers too much information about the food they feed to their families.

Along with the corporate lobbyists who wrote this bill, these companies think it is wrong that states tell people when the bottled water on their supermarket shelves has high levels of arsenic. They think it is wrong to inform pregnant women that eating mercury-laden fish could do serious damage to a fetus. And what about letting people know that their ground beef was treated with carbon monoxide? That, apparently, is wrong, too.

They want us to buy more, and think less about our health and safety. That, and that alone, is the motivation behind the National Food Uniformity Act.

Supporters of this bill claim that all they want is to make consumer protections the same for all Americans. But that isn't what this bill will do.

Most states give their citizens more information about their food than the Food and Drug Administration requires. In fact, 80 percent of the food safety work performed in the United States is done by state and local officials.

They are officials with the expertise and on-the-ground experience needed to keep our consumers safe. And they are doing an excellent job.

But this law will allow the FDA to invalidate state food labeling laws and apply its own, lower standards nation-wide.

The consequences of this bill will be drastic.

Within a matter of months, more than 200 state food safety laws will be wiped off the books. Experienced state health officials who want their regulations back will be forced to come to Washington, hat in hand. They will have to plead with FDA bureaucrats to keep their food safety laws in place, laws that their own legislators and citizens have already established.

In other words, they will need to seek approval from an agency that can't keep us safe anymore, an agency that can't meet its current workload, and that recently approved several drugs which have turned out to be dangerous.

Suddenly, the Party of states rights and of small government wants to forget about both. Instead, it wants to send quality state regulations that are protecting Americans into a bureaucratic black hole.

M. Speaker, the people and organizations most concerned about the safety of our nation's food stand in strong opposition to this bill. Attorneys general, and public health and safety officials from around the country, have come out against it. In fact, the Association of Food and Drug Officials recently wrote a letter to Representative Rogers of Michigan, the sponsor of the Act, asking him to reconsider his own legislation. It said, and I quote:

"Members of the AFDO are state and local governments with no profit motive, merely a public health concern who feel strongly that the legislation...will gravely impair state and local authorities' ability to protect their constituents."

M. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to insert this letter in the Record.

As is often the case, the bill before us does more than provide just another example of how private interests trump the

public good in today's Congress. It also shows just how broken and undemocratic our political process has become. No public hearings were held on this legislation. No state and local public health officials were called in to testify about it. Both the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, and the Association of Food and Drug Officials, expressed their willingness to talk to Congress about this issue. They were turned away.

These dedicated public servants were ignored because this legislation could never have withstood proper scrutiny. It was written with special interests in mind, not the public interest - pure and simple.

Last year, the Majority pledged honest and immediate reform of the way Congress wrote bills. And yet here we are, in a new year - and nothing has changed.

We need an open and democratic process in this House. We need to stop passing bills that treat the public interest with contempt. And we need to start today.

I urge my colleagues to oppose this bill, and I reserve the balance of my time.