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House to Vote on Food-Safety Legislation

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By Jane Zhang

The House is expected to vote Wednesday on legislation that would significantly increase the Food and Drug Administration's funding and authority to police food safety.

Democratic leaders will bring up the legislation under a procedure that allows limited debate and no amendments and requires a two-thirds supermajority vote to pass. The bill unanimously passed the House Energy and Commerce Committee in June.

The vote was scheduled after negotiations averted a prolonged turf battle between two powerful Democrats: House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin C. Peterson of Minnesota and Rep. John Dingell of Michigan, the Commerce Committee's chairman emeritus. The committees were still working on the final language Tuesday afternoon.

Mr. Peterson had threatened to stop the legislation if it didn't explicitly exempt livestock or grain farmers and others that are regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Mr. Dingell, the legislation's main sponsor, has said the legislation wasn't intended to overlay FDA rules on USDA regulations.

The negotiations over the USDA-FDA regulatory boundaries didn't include Republicans on the Agriculture Committee, and Rep. Frank Lucas of Oklahoma, the senior Republican on the committee, sent a letter to lawmakers urging them to vote against the bill. "It will lead to huge regulatory burdens on our nation's farmers and ranchers, and it contains very little that will actually contribute to the goal of safer food," [he said in a statement](#) Monday night.

Consumer groups, however, urged lawmakers to pass the bill, saying Congress already has held more than 20 hearings on food safety in the aftermath of a string of widespread food-borne illnesses involving products such as hot peppers, spinach and lettuce. The outbreaks exposed gaps in the FDA's ability to prevent large-scale outbreaks and trace the source once they begin.

Under the legislation, the FDA would be able to order food recalls. The bill would also require the agency to inspect food facilities more often and would give FDA authority to set production and record-keeping standards to prevent contamination and more easily trace outbreaks. Food facilities would be required to register and pay an annual \$500 fee. The Congressional Budget Office said that beyond the fees, the FDA would need \$2.2 billion over five years to carry out its new responsibilities.

The Senate isn't expected to act on similar legislation until the fall, after it finishes work on health-care legislation.