

Lawmakers seek answers on tainted school food

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By Stephanie Banchemo

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U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and Rep. Jan Schakowsky called Tuesday for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to explain what role the agency played in a food poisoning incident that left 42 Joliet pupils and teachers ill after eating chicken tenders sodden with ammonia.

The Illinois lawmakers requested a meeting with Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman after the Tribune reported Sunday that ammonia-laden chicken, beef and potato wedges landed in Illinois school cafeterias. Cafeteria managers across the state had complained for a year about food that reeked of ammonia, but state and federal regulators failed to alert school districts.

Schakowsky and Durbin want the USDA, which oversees the nation's school lunch program, to outline changes it plans to make to prevent other food poisoning outbreaks.

The lawmakers also want Veneman to support legislation that would bolster the safety of school meals by requiring mandatory recalls by USDA and swifter notification to schools by state officials, who administer the program.

"With all the concerns parents face today, they should not have to face the added fear that their children's lunch may sicken or even kill their child," Schakowsky said. "The federal government cannot continue to take a hands-off approach when it comes to the quality of school lunches and the safety of our nation's students."

USDA officials said they just received the letter Tuesday so it was too early to say whether they would agree to the meeting.

"But we are definitely committed to a strong regulatory system, and we are continually working to enhance it," said Julie Quick, deputy press secretary for the agency.

The problems began in November 2001 when a pipe ruptured at Gateway Cold Storage in St. Louis, spewing liquid ammonia across food bound for Illinois schools. Toxic fumes crept through the building and permeated cardboard boxes holding plastic-wrapped portions of chicken, beef, potatoes and cheese.

USDA inspectors knew about the leak but failed to notify state education or health officials. USDA officials say it was Gateway's responsibility to tell the other agencies.

Missouri and St. Louis health officials also allege that the USDA allowed Gateway to ship poultry and beef out of the facility, despite a quarantine order placed on the food. USDA officials deny the accusation.

The State Board of Education and the USDA are investigating the incident. Will County State's Atty. Jeff Tomczak is looking into filing criminal charges.

Schakowsky and Durbin say the incident at Laraway Elementary School in Joliet highlights the shortcomings in the National School Lunch Program and say that the Safe School Food Act--drafted in response to a 2001 Tribune investigation that revealed serious deficiencies in the lunch program--could have prevented it.

The legislation would, among other things, give the USDA authority to recall unsafe food. Currently, the agency can only suggest that food companies recall food. Under the legislation, the agriculture secretary could require companies to immediately stop distributing tainted food.

Additionally, the bill would require the USDA to notify states that they are in possession of contaminated food and would insist states notify schools within 24 hours.