

How to Make Imports Safer

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Import Safety

The Import Safety Working Group organized by President Bush said in a press conference Friday, Aug. 17, that to improve the safety of U.S. imports, it will be necessary to boost quality during the manufacturing process and to expand the use of technology at inspections.

There is no way improvement can be done through blanket inspections.

The present scale of imports into the country makes it impossible to inspect everything, said Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt, who is also chairman of the working group. But the country should prepare itself to assure

safeguards on imports that are likely to increase three times its present volume by 2015.

The import safety group was organized by President Bush in July, and given 60 days to submit recommendations on how to improve the safety of imported goods. Friday was the mid-point in the group's timetable. The committee was organized after a number of product recalls involving toys, imported food, toothpaste and tires. Many of these products were manufactured in China.

Congress has called for reforms in the system of overseeing imports. One recommendation is to consolidate all oversight functions (currently distributed over many agencies) under one director; another option proposes to increase funding for oversight agencies and grant more powers.

Under the existing set-up the Food and Drug Administration inspects about 1 percent of food products, including fruits, vegetables and seafood, while the Department of Agriculture tests about 10 percent of imported meat. The Consumer Product Safety Commission cannot do much inspection with its staff of less than 100 investigators; it must rely on manufacturers to inform the agency about safety problems.

Increasingly, Customs, border patrol and other agencies of the Department of Homeland Security will assist in the effort to ensure the safety of imports. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said the work will complement the department's own efforts to protect against terrorism.

Both cabinet officials suggested companies should insist on closer compliance with U.S. safety standards by their suppliers abroad. The scope and vastness of the volume of imports is simply too overwhelming for inspections. Instead, quality and safety must be built into the process from the very start of manufacturing and every step of the way.

The group's report will be issued next month. It is expected to include safety improvement measures like deploying better technology for more shipment inspections at U.S. ports rather than in distant laboratories, strengthening manufacturing quality, and making sure exporting countries know about U.S. safety standards.

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