

Food safety, particularly for imported foods, is a serious problem. Help is on the way — but slowly, very slowly.

According to the [NY Times](#):

About 15 percent of food that Americans eat comes from abroad, more than double what it was just 10 years ago, including nearly two-thirds of fresh fruits and vegetables. And the safety of the food supply — foreign and domestic — is a critical public health issue. One in every six Americans becomes ill from eating contaminated food each year, Dr. Margaret Hamburg, F.D.A. commissioner, estimated. About 130,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die.

The Pew Trust [estimates](#) that about half of the multi-state food poisoning outbreaks in the past five years were due to imported foods. Yet FDA has only a small number of inspectors, and can only inspect a small fraction of imports.

In 2010, Congress passed a food safety [law](#) to deal with the problem. But regulations have been slow in coming. There were delays while the White House's regulatory czar reviewed and apparently watered down rules. There may also have been pushback from exporting countries that had to be dealt with. Food safety advocates sued FDA to get the process back on track, The court rejected FDA's proposed schedule and [ordered](#) completion of all the rules before July 2015. This has been something of a pattern in recent years: the government doesn't get around to actually issuing the regulations required by law until the courts step in.

Last Friday, FDA finally released proposals for key rules applying to imported foods. Under the new regulations, Importers must have a plan identifying the potential hazards for each food, and they must document for FDA what is being done to control the hazards. The basic idea is that importers like Walmart will be responsible for policing their own supply chains. Under another rule, FDA would recognize accreditation bodies, including foreign governments, non-profits, or private companies, to accredit third-party auditors, which could then certify the food source.

FDA will now receive a flood of comments about the proposal, which it will have to digest and respond to. Then the White House will want to vet the final rule. With luck, the final rule will come out in the next year or two. Then, of course, there will be the inevitable litigation. With luck, today's proposals might make it all the way through the process by the time Obama leaves office in 2016. (And of course, that's assuming that a [provision](#) recently passed by the House, which is intended to delay the rules, doesn't become law.) Hopefully, this lengthy process will improve the quality of the final product, but there's a cost: a longer period of time before our food supply becomes safer.