A new public-private initiative aims to advance the U.S. strategy of defending against contaminated food imports at the source rather than at the border.

In an effort to increase the foreign scientific capacity needed to uncover contamination prior to commodities shipping, the University of Maryland and the Waters Corporation plan to build and operate the first U.S.-based laboratory for training foreign food producers. They will be taught U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved procedures.

“Inspection at the border is not an option,” said Jianghong Meng, who directs the Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN), the University of Maryland-FDA center that will operate the lab and conduct the training.

“We import so much food from other countries that the FDA can only inspect about one percent of it,” Meng explains. “The answer is to control contamination at the source.”

The new facility—the International Food Safety Training Laboratory (IFSTL)—will teach approximately 200 foreign food and government workers per year. It will be based at the University of Maryland and is expected to open in July 2011.

The Waters Corporation will build the facility as well as assist in designing the program. Waters is a major manufacturer of laboratory equipment used to detect and measure the presence of chemical contaminants in food. Its investment, valued at over $4 million, is essential for the project.

JIFSAN will be responsible for curriculum and training at the International Food Safety Training Laboratory, and will operate the lab as a self-supporting facility.

Although about 15 percent of the total U.S. food supply is imported, Meng notes that figures are much higher for certain commodities. For example, more than 80 percent of shrimp and one-third of fresh produce sold in the U.S. is imported.

Meng points to a 2008 outbreak of Salmonella that sickened more than 1,400 people and was traced back to conditions at a Mexican pepper farm as an example of the risks of food contamination.
“This initiative stresses a hands-on approach to building scientific capacity,” said Paul Mazzocchi, JIFSAN’s associate director. “Trainees will be put through intensive programs practicing FDA-recommended protocols and operating actual lab equipment. It’s a unique and cost-effective way to build foreign capacity quickly.”

“The University of Maryland is very excited about this innovative partnership through the Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition,” said President C. D. Mote, Jr. “This collaboration is a superb example of how the public and private sectors can maximize their impact by combining their strengths. The new programs have excellent potential for improving food safety internationally.”

“Waters Corporation is committed to bridging the gap between governments and industry to ensure the best science and most innovative technologies are used to make our food safe,” said Waters Corporation Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer Douglas A. Berthiaume. “We are proud to join with the University of Maryland to create this laboratory that will bolster the capabilities of both the FDA and our global partners as we work together to improve food safety.”

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