International Food Safety Training Laboratory
Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is the IFSTL?
A. The IFSTL is the first permanent laboratory in the world to provide both hands-on training on food contamination detection and classroom lessons on regulatory standards, educating governments and industry so they can ensure food is safe before it’s exported and reaches the table. Created through a groundbreaking public-private partnership between the U.S. FDA and University of Maryland’s Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN) and Waters Corporation, a Massachusetts-based technology and software manufacturer, the IFSTL will train scientists to understand best practices in food testing that will help them meet regulatory standards.

Q. What is the goal of the IFSTL?
A. The goal of the IFSTL is to improve food safety globally by increasing the application of best-available science and technology, which governments around the world recognize has to be expanded if we are to meet the complex global challenge. The IFSTL puts public and private sector expertise and resources to work to help governments and food manufacturers improve their ability to detect contamination and understand regulatory standards. The lab will spread the use of best practices and create permanent channels of communication between food regulators and food producers. Over time, this will increase food safety and enable standards to rise across the board.

Q. Do you expect the IFSTL to serve as a model for other labs?
A. Yes. The IFSTL and Waters are committed to expanding this public-private partnership to other critical global markets and by doing so, increasing the ability to improve food safety and public health around the world. Partnerships with the FDA and other international regulatory agencies, along with the private sector and academia will foster collaboration in a way that can enhance food safety standards globally.

Q. Who will teach the courses?
A. Courses will be taught by FDA, JIFSAN and UMD scientists, as well as full time IFSTL staff. Expertise from other federal agencies, like the USDA, will also be tapped, depending on course material. These scientists will lead intensive programs for trainees and teach fit-for-purpose chemical and microbiological analytical testing methods that allow scientists to validate and use results to make the right decisions about whether food is safe and meets regulations.

Q. What kinds of courses will be offered at the IFSTL?
A. The IFSTL will run a series of 1-2 week courses, each addressing a specific issue of concern to the U.S. and global communities, for groups of up to 20 to maximize classroom and laboratory instruction. Courses will cover a variety of topics, developed in consultation with FDA, international agencies and industry to address the most critical issues. The IFSTL will offer standing courses and also accept requests for specific course material. A certificate will be earned by those completing all aspects of the course and lab work.

Q. What kind of technologies will be at the lab?
A. The lab will be equipped with state-of-the-art mass spectrometry, ultra-performance liquid chromatography with both photodiode array and fluorescence detection, and a full-range of microbiological tools.
Q. How will trainees be able to use the information they learn at the IFSTL?
A. Trainees will study the latest methods of analysis, operate top-of-the-line instrumentation, learn food safety standards and gain an understanding of how to apply testing methods to meet regulations (fit-for-purpose testing methods). This will ease pressures on regulators and strengthen the safety of the food supply before it reaches the table. Government and industry food safety professionals also will be able to use the IFSTL as a clearinghouse for information on international food safety regulations, testing methods and chemistries, and FDA and other government agency notices and announcements.

Q. What has been the response from other countries?
A. Since the IFSTL was first announced in 2010, partners have received a strong, positive response from governments and industry in many other countries. Numerous governments and food producers have expressed interest in sending their scientists to the IFSTL. In fact, at FDA’s request, in June the IFSTL hosted a pilot class with representatives from Central and South America to help meet training requirements established in the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR).

Q. How will this improve food safety?
A. Ensuring food safety is a tough challenge for countries around the world — as we have seen with the string of contaminations in recent years — and improving it requires more than simple changes to regulations or a few more inspections at port. The IFSTL will expand the reach of available training for international scientists and enable those scientists to take the information they learn back to their own food testing labs and share best practices with their colleagues. This approach further advances the strategy of defending against contaminated food at the source, before it is exported or reaches the dinner table. With this unique training, scientists can better identify chemical contaminants and pathogens in accordance with regulations.

Q. How will the IFSTL contribute to the goals of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)?
A. FSMA, signed into law in January 2011, recognizes the importance of strengthening existing collaboration among all food safety agencies and calls for building the capacity of foreign governments to test for food contamination. Specifically, Section 305 of FSMA calls for:
   - A “plan to expand the technical, scientific, and regulatory food safety capacity of foreign governments, and their respective food industries”
   - “Training of foreign governments and food producers on United States requirements for safe food”
   - Developing “recommendations on whether and how to harmonize requirements under the Codex Alimentarius”
   - Establishing “provisions for the multilateral acceptance of laboratory methods and testing detection techniques”

The IFSTL will help FDA meet these FSMA provisions by providing the infrastructure for the U.S. government to train foreign scientists on U.S. food safety requirements, enhance communication and promote permanent channels of collaboration between the FDA and international regulators on best testing detection methods. The IFSTL will help ensure foreign governments and food producers will be better able to conduct U.S. quality regulatory checks at the source, adding another layer of protection for food supplies. IFSTL courses will also teach lessons on new U.S. food safety standards contained in FSMA, and other U.S. regulations, which will be taught in consultation with FDA.