

FOOD SAFETY

The significant corporate consolidation of global food production has created a food system that values quantity over quality. Every single decision a farmer or corporation makes about growing or raising a certain kind of food affects the final product. Cutting corners on the quality of animal feed, waste management, training for farm workers, processing methods and distribution all affect the safety of our food. From E. coli in spinach to mad cow disease in beef, it is clear that lowering the bottom line at any cost creates significant concerns about the safety of our food.

HOW SAFE IS OUR FOOD?

While the newspapers report on only a handful of large outbreaks of food borne illnesses, 76 million Americans suffer from food poisoning each year. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 325,000 people are hospitalized for food related illnesses and 5,200 die each year. Only a small percentage of those illnesses and deaths result from known pathogens.

CONTAMINATION

Most food-related diseases and infections are caused by bacteria, viruses and parasites that can be transmitted through the food we eat. Other illnesses result from poisoning by harmful toxins. Some of the most common infections result from three bacteria: Campylobacter, Salmonella and E. coli O157:H7.

FACTORY FARMS

The filthy conditions inside a factory farm lead to many illnesses in confined animals and further the risk of food contamination in processing. Adding to the formula of risk, today's beef factories process as many as 400 animals per hour, in contrast to the rate of 175 an hour twenty years ago. The poultry industry is no different. Today's plants can process up to 80 birds a minute. When the rate at which animals are butchered goes up, so does the rate

of contamination: the percentage of broiler chickens that were contaminated with Salmonella in 2005 was almost double that of the same testing period in 2000.

MAD COW

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or Mad Cow disease is another significant concern. Since the disease's first appearance in British dairy herds in 1986, BSE has affected roughly 200,000 cattle, including several in the United States. BSE in cows has been linked to Variant Creutzfeldt-

Jacob Disease or vCJD in humans, which is thought to take up to 30 years to manifest and has no cure.

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COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Imported foods make up 13 percent of the American diet, an amount that has almost doubled in the past decade. Yet imported food is not subject to the same testing and inspection of farms, processing plants and food products as food that is produced domestically. In fact, only 1.3 percent of all imported food is inspected for safety and quality. With such limited oversight the FDA reports that pesticide violations were found in 6.1 percent of imported foods they did inspect, as opposed to 2.4 percent of domestic foods. Rates of Salmonella in fruit and vegetables registered at 4 percent for imported goods and 1.1 percent for domestic production.

Lately, critics have focused on imports from China after a series of pet food, toy and toothpaste recalls. Organic

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FOOD SAFETY (cont'd)

food and ingredients are increasingly imported from China. Any product bearing the USDA organic label must be certified by a third party, regardless of the country of origin. However, certification standards do not include routine testing for pesticide contamination. Countries like China that have a history of heavy pesticide use therefore pose a greater threat of contamination to organic crops. Advocates for an international organic program claim that pesticide residue testing could keep countries with low or no organic certification standards from being able to access U.S. consumers. Defenders of the organic label argue that this lack of testing will eventually compromise the meaning of the standards.

Luckily for consumers, the passage of the 2008 Farm Bill included mandatory country of origin labeling for ground beef (including veal), pork, lamb, goat, and chicken; wild and farm-raised fish and shellfish; fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables; peanuts, pecans, macadamia nuts, and ginseng effective March 16th, 2009. Under the bill, these products must either be labeled directly or have signs posted to inform consumers where they were raised or grown.

REGULATION

The first lines of defense in ensuring the safety of our food should be the standards set by government agencies and the enforcement thereof. Little is currently done to address some of the root issues of food safety, such as conditions on factory farms and slaughterhouse practices. The primary focus of government has been on regulation and response. In the event of a crisis, there are often so many agencies involved that it can be difficult to follow and know which agency is empowered to respond or responsible for enforcement of existing regulations.

RECALLS

Both the FDA and USDA can request a food recall but neither can order one to be implemented. Once a food recall has been requested by a government agency, manufacturers can choose to pull the product from circulation or they can choose not to. Recalls are strictly voluntary. There has been some

movement to empower governmental agencies to make voluntary recalls mandatory if the initial request is not successful. However, the legislation remains a proposal at this point.

FOOD PROCESSING

In order to support corporate interests of quantity over quality, government agencies support additional food processing to minimize risk. For example, the irradiation of meat will eliminate some bacterial contaminants, but compromises the quality of the product and does not stop bacterial contamination after the product is processed and irradiated. Processes like irradiation are more of a quick fix than a systemic solution to the safety problems caused by industrial farming.

What You Can Do...

Do not despair. Independent family farmers are a good source for sustainably produced and locally grown food. By buying locally, you can increase your chances of getting a fresh, high-quality product. Local farmers may invite you to visit the farm or talk about any food safety concerns that you may have. Most importantly, if you buy close to the source, you can help create local food systems, which promote the exact opposite of the quantity over quality kind of food production that has created so many food safety issues. To find a farmer near you, visit the Eat Well Guide.



To find sustainably raised meat near you visit www.eatwellguide.org.

Find more detailed information about food safety on our website at www.sustainabletable.org/issues/foodsafety.

