

FOOD SCIENCE OR POLITICAL SCIENCE?

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Newspapers and cartoonists across the country have had a hey-day over the past several weeks alleging that Congress intends to derail all public health and food safety programs, letting consumers fend for themselves.

The rhetoric attacking Congress' regulatory improvements are based solely on political science; however, the absolutely necessary reforms for food safety are based on food science. Politics has always played a tremendous role in the food bureaucracy, given that four different government agencies fight for funding and personnel to protect consumers from a food industry that supposedly can't be trusted.

Hundreds of FDA inspectors visit food plants on average of once every four to six years. Meat and poultry plants can only operate under the continual watchful eye of more than 8,000 full-time USDA inspectors. Seafood plants operate under a voluntary inspection program at FDA and the Department of Commerce.

Putting politics aside, the federal food safety police should concentrate on preventing the number one food safety culprit in all foods: harmful bacteria. Bacteria like salmonella and E. coli 0157:H7 cannot be found, much less controlled, by traditional "see-smell-touch" inspection. Nor can they be "tested out" of the food supply.

The dilemma facing regulators and industry is how to reform the current food inspection programs so they control microbiological problems, protect consumers better, and keep industry responsible for the safety of its foods. Here's a starting point.

Create one food safety agency and start over. If politics can ever be put aside, the creation of one food safety agency would be the most efficient use of continually-dwindling federal resources. Also, the current food inspection laws are so outdated; they need a complete overhaul. The food safety regulator takes a piecemeal approach to reform, introducing new programs on top of the old. Layering new, science-based programs on outdated bureaucratic rules just don't cut it.

Base food safety regulations on risk. Risk assessment of food production processes should dictate where resources are devoted. Those processes with the greatest risk to public health should have the greatest amount of oversight and controls.

Get the government out of good plants and into bad plants. We don't need government inspectors in every food plant every hour of every day; we need them in plants that have a record of poor performance. If plants have a history of producing safe foods, then let them operate autonomously. A third-party oversight program could be utilized for checks-and-balances.

The foundation for food safety should be prevention, not detection. Every point in the food chain should use the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point system, which has a proven track record for preventing hazards from occurring. It was developed in the late 1960s by the Pillsbury Company to produce safe foods for NASA's space program.

Establish food safety programs from farm to table. Food safety hazards can occur on the farm where animals are raised and in the consumer's kitchen where the food is prepared. If you produce a safe product at one point in the food chain but contaminate it at another point, then all gains are lost. Focusing only on meat and poultry plants will not do the trick; in fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that over 90 percent of foodborne illnesses result from mishandling after the product leaves the plant.

Establish a microbiological testing program based on good science. If bacteria are the culprit, then we need to find and control them. National microbiological marketplace baseline data on raw and cooked food products should be collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the industry as a whole and to evaluate individual plant performance. But testing should not be used to determine if a product is "good" or "bad." All raw meat and poultry products have bacteria -- it's a part of nature -- and there is no scientific consensus on how much bacteria are "acceptable."

Use technologies that reduce or eliminate harmful bacteria. In the raw meat and poultry industry, there are only a handful of technologies that destroy bacteria. Cooking is undoubtedly the best defense. In slaughter plants, antibacterial rinses help improve the safety profile of carcasses. Irradiation is another proven technology used in more than 20 other countries, but shunned in the United States. Both the food police and industry should be chided for not encouraging and adopting the use of irradiation for food safety.

Good science, combined with common sense, should drive food safety reform. The debate is how to get from here to there. The current USDA proposal just does not go far enough. But the reality is politics will likely prevail, resulting in a slightly-modified status quo food inspection program that saves government jobs at the expense of improved food safety.

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