

Food Fight

Why Obama and Congress are not doing enough to keep our food safe.

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The ongoing outbreak of salmonella in peanut products that officially began in early January has now killed at least nine people, put roughly 150 in the hospital, and sickened hundreds more. The FDA's list of recalled products has grown past 3,000--with dozens of new ones still being added, many of them with innocuous names like Zen Party Mix or Naughty but Nice Granola Bites. Asked for an estimate of how many packages and jars of potentially tainted products were distributed, an FDA spokesman tells me, "That information is not currently available. I am not certain we will ever know."

It's not just peanut butter, either. There was the 2007 recall of 21.7 million pounds of *e. coli*-contaminated beef traced back to Canadian cattle. We've seen illnesses and fatalities involving melons, green onions, raspberries, bagged salad greens, spinach, tomatoes, and pet food. Each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 76 million Americans get sick from foodborne illnesses--with 5,000 deaths. We've reached the point where even Barack Obama has worried aloud on morning television that Sasha's peanut-butter sandwiches may not be trustworthy.

That's why, after years of Bush-era budget cuts and lax regulation, there's a newfound demand for food oversight legislation. Illinois Senator Dick Durbin introduced a reworked version of his FDA Food Safety Modernization Act a few days ago, which, according to his office, has bipartisan sponsorship and support from both industry and consumer groups. More than a dozen other bills floating around Congress call for tighter inspection regimes of the food system, stronger investigative authorities, and better labeling.

Even Obama's Agriculture secretary, former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack--who many decried as corporate, conventional, and something of a shill for Big Ag--has surprised food-safety advocates by appointing a pro-regulation deputy, Kathleen Merrigan, and coming out in favor of a single new agency

to regulate food. (At the moment, the FDA monitors seafood, produce, baked goods, and dairy; the USDA oversees commercial meat and poultry; the CDC takes the lead on tracking down sources of outbreak; and several other federal agencies play supporting roles on various items.)

Those are all good ideas. But they may not really get at the root of the problem, which will likely require a fundamental reevaluation of how our food is produced and consumed. Over the weekend, Obama announced a new Food Safety Working Group and a new FDA Commissioner, Dr. Margaret Hamburg, former health commissioner of New York City. This signals a much higher voltage behind the food safety campaign, as it relates to inspections and clean-up authority. But there's reason to worry that these moves, too, will only scratch the surface. "In a way they're just rearranging the deck chairs," says Paul Roberts, author of *The End of Food*, "because you have to deal with deeper, systemic problems"--problems that will only be exacerbated by the deepening economic crisis.

One cause of these food scares lies in retailers' tendency to push for ever-lower pricing. This puts pressure on suppliers to produce food as cheaply as possible, which ratchets up the temptation to cut corners and game the food-safety inspection process. This model reduces the amount we pay at the supermarket, but possibly at the expense of our health and public safety--which raises the question of whether we're actually paying less.

One of the primary downsides of these cost-cutting measures is the move toward greater centralization of the agriculture industry. The CDC attributes some of the current contamination hazard to "an increasingly centralized food supply," because "food contaminated in production can be rapidly shipped to many states, causing a widespread outbreak." Processing food in larger, centralized plants also puts more people at risk. "With smaller plants, if there is a mistake, the number of people affected is smaller," says Chuck Hassebrook, long-time executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs.

The drive for lower prices almost guarantees a low-paid, high-turnover workforce. "To have real control over how all those people, under a lot of stress, and with very limited experience, are protecting the sanitariness of the product, is just very, very difficult," Hassebrook says of the meat industry. The trend toward larger plants compounds the difficulty of maintaining a loyal workforce.

The speed of domestic production lines also makes ramping up inspections enormously expensive and at least partly ineffective. Roberts estimates that the number of inspectors will have to increase many fold before they can

really monitor quality--and even then, it is difficult to effectively gauge. "[Inspectors] are making calls that the stuff looks like hell, it looks dirty, it looks like there's contaminant on it, so I'm going to turn it back," Roberts says, "but what about the food that looks clean, but isn't?"

So what's the alternative? Dispersed production and distribution of food might help underwrite more stable rural economies, higher wages, and safer food. Limiting centralization, however, would involve slowing--or even reversing--the consolidation of the food industry into major industrial companies. And it's unclear whether these radical reforms will get much of an airing in the Obama administration. Hassebrook, for one, was passed over for a top USDA post by the Obama team--possibly because he antagonized too many Midwest Democrats with strong ties to the agriculture industry.

There's also the question of what Congress and the Obama administration are overlooking. During the Bush years, both the Government Accountability Office, National Academy of Sciences, and others documented a huge backlog of untreated food-related problems: Filthy "concentrated animal feeding operations" that feature over-medicated and often-mutilated livestock; the diminishing effectiveness of antibiotics in the human population because of their overuse in CAFOs; giant lagoons of animal waste that blight the landscape, the watershed, and the airshed; exhausted soils; polluted and diminishing groundwater supplies; a desperately exploited illegal foreign labor force; agricultural runoff that is suffocating the Chesapeake Bay and has created a "dead zone" about the size of New Jersey in the Gulf of Mexico; and the creation of a major fraction of the national output of greenhouse gases that feed global warming. And all that is in addition to the epidemic of obesity and other food-centered health issues among us humans.

Getting public attention fixed on those kinds of problems will be more difficult. Unlike toxic supermarket food, they don't quite resolve into a well-focused picture. That project will require some political risk-taking, and a willingness to introduce a more wide-ranging conversation about food and its underpinnings around American dinner tables. "I spend a lot of time talking with people who are not incrementalists, and they have been on the margins for most of their careers," Roberts says. "Now all of a sudden, everyone's talking about the dangers of the food system and the need to change, and so they have a broader audience. And yet, they're still, in many cases, pushing the same message, which just makes no sense to a mainstream audience."

The most radical reforms may involve changing the American food mindset, such as the idea that people should be eating a lot less meat, for example, or that we pay too little for our food, and we're getting what we pay for. In a realistic analysis of solutions, "You're forced to consider that food might have to become more expensive to be safer," Roberts says. "And that's not what you want to hear, right about now."

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