

SALMONELLA AND WORSE

The American Food System Is

It's not up to FDA food safety director Stephen F. Sundlof to tell me whether we should reorganize the whole U.S. food and agriculture system. But his video — on the agency's salmonella-and-peanuts Web site — does pose the right question: "Well, a lot of people are asking me lately, what's safe to eat and what isn't safe to eat?"



STEVE
NASH

No kidding! We're all asking each other that. The Web site meant to help consumers cope with the outbreak has gotten more than 48 million page views by now. Even the president has said he's concerned about his

daughter Sasha's peanut butter sandwiches.

I have to go recheck the pantry, and so do you. It isn't over yet. The list of recalled peanut products has now grown to nearly 4,000, and another outbreak, this time in pistachios, was expanded recently to include 523 new products. It gives "branding" a whole new meaning.

Peanut contamination cases have tapered off, but given their long shelf-life, the Food and Drug Administration says, overlooked packages are a potential salmonella time-bomb. Most of the time, symptoms are mild, but the peanut outbreak has been implicated in nine deaths so far and sickened at least 666 people in 45 states, 116 of whom were hospitalized. Who knows how many cases have gone unreported?

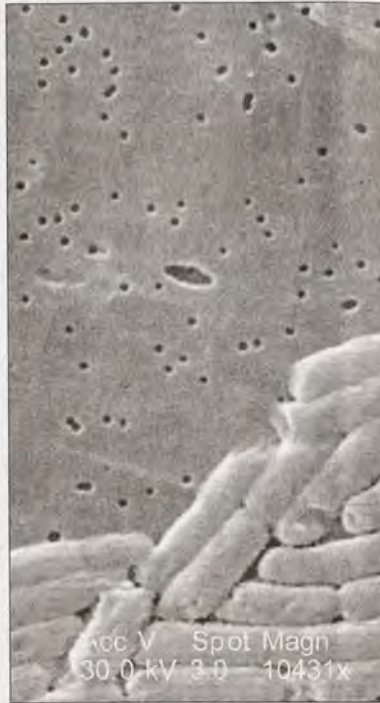
When I squint through some of my product labels to look for trouble, I'm happy to see at least one innocent-seeming, single-ingredient package of pine nuts. But the label reads "Product of China." Oh.

Paging back through the headlines reminds us that some of our bad food is foreign and some is homeland-grown: industrial melamine in livestock feed, an antifreeze chemical in toothpaste, lead-laced tea and coffee — all recent China exports. Then there's the 2007 recall of 21.7 million pounds of *e. coli*-contaminated ground beef traced to Canadian cattle; another peanut butter/salmonella outbreak sickened hundreds in 39 states a couple of years ago; illness or fatalities recalls involving melons, green onions, raspberries, strawberries, mixed bagged salad greens, cantaloupe, jalapeños, seafood, lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, and pet food.

So the president has declared safer food a priority. Now, as with so much of the newly unstable national apparatus, he'll need to calculate: How much of the way we do food will have to be overhauled, with incentives re-rigged and market gyrations restrained?

There's a ferocious backlog of other food-related issues, too — not visibly on the Obama agenda so far. In Pentagonese, they're the "collateral damage," in econospeak the "externalities," of the current food production setup.

Among them: filthy concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) that feature overmedicated and often mutilated livestock; the diminishing effectiveness of antibiotics in the human population because of their overuse in those CAFOs, which also give us enormous lagoons of animal excrement that blight the landscape and the airshed; abused and exhausted soils; polluted, diminishing water sources; a desperately exploited foreign labor force; agricultural runoff that is killing the Chesapeake Bay and has created a dead zone the size of New Jersey in the Gulf of Mexico; the creation of a major fraction of the national output



of greenhouse gases that feed global warming — not to mention an epidemic of obesity and other health issues among consumers.

Caroline Smith DeWaal of the Center for Science in the Public Interest has called our food safety system "seriously broken." She is reportedly being considered for a top USDA post, and other recent appointments have stirred hopes for a food regulation agenda that goes well beyond the immediate sandwich.

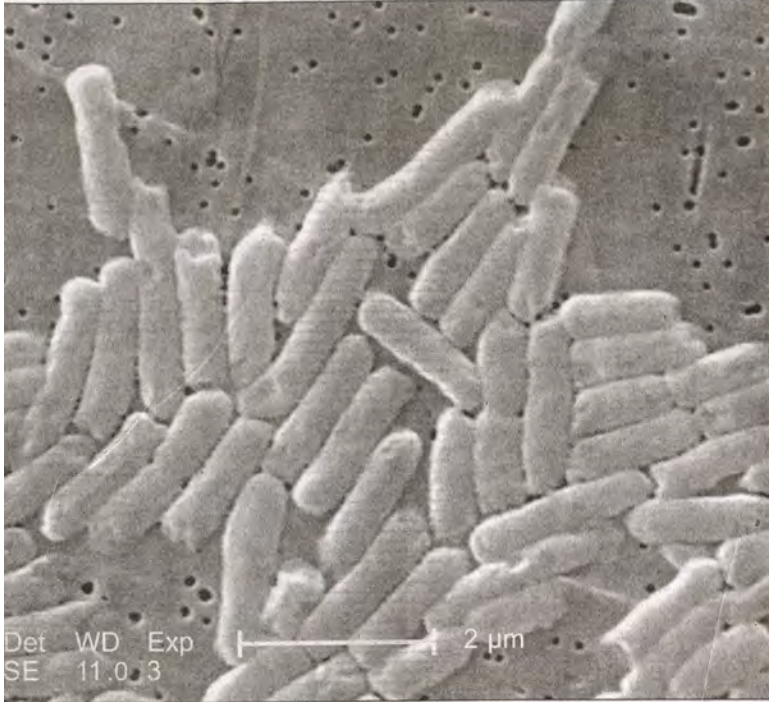
Food scares are a blunt instrument, but at least they move the conversation forward. Ideas once dismissed as Cassandra stuff — the hazards of a hugely centralized food production system, for instance — are now closer to the main current of conversation. Even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention attribute some of the current contamination hazard to "an increasingly centralized food supply."

As DeWaal recently told me, "The people who have been promoting these models of efficiency and concentration in agriculture production also promised that they could deliver safer food products, but the outbreaks have clearly demonstrated that's not true . . . This is actually a really good time for the development of a locally sustainable agriculture model."

Our regulatory system's a mess, a Byzantium of confused, ineffective, and politically compro-

**Our regulator
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s Enough to Make You Sick



CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

The salmonella bacteria.

mised jurisdiction. More than a dozen bills now before Congress call for tighter inspection regimes and some reorganizing, but even if they aren't beaten back, not everyone's convinced they'll do enough. "All those things will be important," author Paul Roberts told me, "but in a way they're just rearranging the deck chairs, because you have to deal with deeper, systemic problems."

Roberts' new book, *The End of Food*, concludes that the wheels are coming off. The retail end of the food supply chain dictates ever-lower pricing and ever-smaller inventories, and lots of foreign imports. That gives retailers and consumers high-volume cheap food. But it also pressures the health and safety practices of food producers

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China-ward, down toward the level of our international competition. Are we really paying less when we sit down to a family dinner that's some kind of microbial lottery?

The current system also guarantees a poorly paid, high-turnover

work force in meat-packing, according to Chuck Hassebrook, executive director of Nebraska's Center for Rural Affairs. "We have very big plants with very high chain speeds," he told me. "It's dangerous work, it's hard work. 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.

"I would much rather take my chances with a smaller plant that has employees who are experienced, have been there a long time, who are dedicated to it, than I would these very large operations," he added. "And with smaller plants, if there is a mistake, the number of people affected is smaller."

Hassebrook was passed over for top USDA posts by the Obama folks. He says he antagonized Midwest Democrats with strong ties to Big Farma. That may indicate the limits of the administration's food safety horizons.

The most radical reforms may involve changing the American mindset, shaped over decades by corporate food advertising mythology. Here's a weird idea: It might be great to eat a lot less meat. Meat overproduction generates vicious health and environmental problems. Or another eyebrow-raiser: 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 said. "And that's not what you want to hear, right about now."

Certainly not. On the other hand, there are a lot of ghosts in that pantry to appease. We may not want to risk hearing much more from them, either.

• Steve Nash teaches in the journalism and environmental studies programs at the University of Richmond. Contact him at snash@richmond.edu. The FDA Web site mentioned in the column is <http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/salmonellatyp.html>.