



BRIEF ANALYSIS

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The Meat Inspection Debate

In February, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed comprehensive new meat processing standards aimed at reducing microbial contamination. The standards were hotly debated this past July during Senate consideration of regulatory reform, with families of children injured or killed by tainted meat distributing hamburgers with warning labels on Capitol Hill.

Death From Food. According to the USDA, tainted food causes up to 7,000 deaths annually, more than half the result of eating meat and poultry products. The problem has drawn increased attention in recent years due to several highly publicized outbreaks.

- Undercooked hamburgers from Jack In The Box stores in the Northwest caused four deaths and more than 500 cases of illness in early 1993; the pathogen responsible was a particularly virulent strain of *E. coli*.
- Contamination spread from chicken to other food in a Mexican restaurant in Florida in August 1995, causing a salmonella outbreak that affected several hundred patrons.

Although *E. coli* has received most of the recent press attention, USDA statistics indicate that the estimated food-borne toll from *E. coli* (160-400 deaths annually) is lower than that from several other types of food-borne bacteria: salmonella (700-3,800), staphylococcus aureus (1,200), listeria (400-500) and campylobacter (100-500). These figures are not very reliable, however, given differences in state reporting procedures. David Murray of the Washington-based Statistical Assessment Service found that the scientific references the USDA cited for its *E. coli* death toll simply did not support its numbers; by Murray's calculations, the death toll ranges from three to 72, far lower than that reported.

In any case, most pathogens can be eliminated by proper storage and cooking. According to the American Meat Institute, 97 percent of all food-borne illnesses result from improper handling in homes and restaurants.

Proposed New Regulations. The USDA proposes something called Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points to focus on key stages in the meat production

process. Inspected facilities would be required to develop a series of standard written operating procedures, including mandatory use of antimicrobial treatments (such as hot water or chemical rinses) on livestock and poultry, time and temperature requirements for chilling and testing to verify that raw products meet government standards for bacterial contamination.

As an interim measure, the USDA would establish baseline salmonella contamination levels and reduction targets for a facility's products. Daily microbial testing would have to be done on a sample of every product produced that day in a plant. Operating procedures, test results and compliance documentation would have to be recorded in files open to government inspection.

Government regulations prohibit measures that could make our food safer.

Many segments of the industry support the concept, but they have severely criticized the USDA proposal for its cost and arbitrariness.

Has the Market Failed? The USDA says yes — many consumers cannot identify food-borne illnesses or trace them to their source. As a result, it argues, meat producers have "little incentive to incur extra costs for more than minimal pathogen controls." This rationale falls apart in the face of facts:

- The USDA admits that many of its proposed procedures are already in place at some facilities, and the industry is accelerating the adoption of such practices.
- Fast food chains increasingly demand more quality assurances from their suppliers, including microbial testing in some cases.
- New technologies, such as steam pasteurization of carcasses to kill *E. coli*, continue to be developed.

If market incentives don't explain these developments, what does?

In some cases, government regulation has actually delayed the introduction of new technologies. For example, food irradiation uses ionizing energy such as that found in x-rays to destroy bacteria and slow food spoilage. The food itself does not become radioactive. Food

irradiation has been endorsed by the World Health Organization and is widely used abroad. The American Gastroenterological Association (AGA), a group of medical specialists, has noted that *E. coli*'s "complete elimination ... is currently impossible unless the product is thoroughly cooked or irradiated." Yet the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which must approve the use of food irradiation processes, took more than two years to approve poultry irradiation and has sat on a petition for irradiation of red meat for more than a year. (Meanwhile, irradiated red meat is available in France, Israel, the Netherlands and South Africa, and to U.S. astronauts on space missions.)

Special-Interest Pressures. The USDA's proposed new procedures, moreover, would not replace the current federal inspection system; they would add to it. The existing visual inspection system has come under increasing criticism because inspectors can spot visible, but not microscopic, contamination.

According to a 1990 report of the National Academy of Sciences, the current system is "more relevant to quality than to food safety." But USDA officials have assured the National Joint Council of Food Inspection Locals, the 7,000-member federal meat inspectors' union, that visual inspection will continue unchanged regardless of the current proposal.

The USDA's proposal reflects the interests of the meat inspectors' union.

Bowing to special interests is nothing new. Some economists believe the federal meat inspection program was inspired not by genuine health issues but by the efforts of local slaughterhouses threatened in the late 1800s by the rise of the giant Chicago meatpackers, which used new refrigerated transportation systems to supply distant markets.

Moreover, there is plenty of evidence that turning matters over to government is no guarantee against unhealthy food. For example, in June 1995, three officials of the New York City School Food Service were removed in the wake of scandals over the deliberate use of spoiled foods, which had led to food poisoning outbreaks involving over a thousand students.

Do We Need More Regulation? The USDA maintains that "the public expects the government to ensure zero risk for meat-borne disease through inspection." Moreover, it argues that "food habits are the most difficult of all forms of human behavior to change." Hence the need for more regulation.

But the history of food safety demonstrates that public attitudes and behavior *can* change. Indeed, the AGA makes precisely this point: "Observations in the United States and other countries have shown that the incidence of food-borne illness can dramatically decline as a result of active public education and effective media coverage."

The danger here is that if the public is led to believe that the government is assuring risk-free food, it may become even more complacent in handling food. Since even the USDA admits that pathogens will not be totally eliminated from meat, such an attitude could well have disastrous consequences.

A Better Approach: Certification Instead of Regulation. If there is in fact a need for the USDA's proposed system, inspections could be available on a voluntary, rather than a mandatory, across-the-board basis.

The USDA seal of inspection could be sought only by firms that believe the cost could be justified from a marketing standpoint — that some consumers would value the seal enough to willingly pay higher product prices. Other processors might rely on their own reputations. Some supermarkets might carry only government-inspected meat products and advertise that fact; others might not. A voluntary USDA seal would be a relatively simple way of testing whether the seal has value to the public.

Calling for even more stringent regulation than that proposed by the USDA, an official of the Safe Food Coalition recently demanded that the USDA seal be "removed from all meat and poultry right now and ... remain off until we can be assured it is true." She was speaking sarcastically, but perhaps the seal should stay off not only until we're assured that it is true, but until we're persuaded that it is needed as well.

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