

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Keeping food safe

Supporting US farmers who provide US consumers with a safe, abundant, affordable supply of food is one of the non-economic rationales that have been used to justify farm policy. The thinking behind this line of reasoning suggests a deal between farmers and consumers. In exchange for a financial safety net, government supported agricultural research, and a variety of other programs, farmers have argued that they provide consumers with a food safety net—a safe, abundant, affordable supply of food.

A look at production numbers makes it clear that US farmers have indeed consistently provided consumers with an abundant supply of food. While famine occurs elsewhere in the world, it is unknown in the US. The share of household income that US consumers pay for food is among the lowest in the world.

The recent outbreaks of foodborne illnesses, *E. coli* in spinach in September and green onions in the last several weeks have raised questions about the safety of our food supply system. A problem in a single field in one state can quickly affect a large number of people over a wide geographic area.

As of noon, Sunday, December 10, 2006, the Center for Disease Control reports that “61 persons with illness associated with the Taco Bell restaurant outbreak have been reported to CDC from 5 states: New Jersey (28), New York (21), Pennsylvania (9), Delaware (2), and South Carolina (1)....Among these 61 ill persons, 50 (82%) were hospitalized and 7 (11%) developed a type of kidney failure called hemolytic-uremic syndrome (HUS). Illness onset dates have ranged from November 20 to December 2.”

The CDC reports that “*Escherichia coli* O157:H7 is a leading cause of foodborne illness.” Over the 1998-2002 period, other leading causes of foodborne-disease outbreaks are norovirus (657 outbreaks), salmonella (585), clostridium perfringens (130), and campylobacter (61). Over that five year period the reported number of *E. coli* outbreaks was 140 involving 4,854 people and 4 deaths. The largest number of deaths (38) came from *Listeria monocytogenes* despite a small number of outbreaks (11). Salmonella was responsible for the second largest number of deaths (20).

At the same time that this outbreak was occurring, the January 2007 issue of *Consumer Reports* hit the newsstands with an article reporting that their “analysis of fresh, whole broilers bought nationwide revealed that 83% harbored campylobacter or salmonella, the leading bacterial causes of foodborne disease.”

In this setting, food safety is certain to be a topic of concern as Congress prepares to write the 2007 farm bill. While most of these food safety issues do not involve the nation’s row crop farmers, no one will be able to escape concerns over foodborne-disease outbreaks.

One of the policy challenges will be to find ways to improve the safety of the US food supply while not unduly burdening small local producers of produce and meats.

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