

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

# Food safety is a key component of public policy

At a meeting of economists this week, we were talking to a colleague about our favorite topic—agriculture. While his work is not focused on agriculture, he said something that caught our attention. He opined that from his perspective the most important policy issue facing agriculture was food safety.

He went on to recite a litany of recent food safety issues—melamine and related compounds in pet food scraps which were then fed to hogs and chickens, *E. coli* contaminated fresh vegetables, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), and the periodic occurrence of *E. coli* in hamburger. He said, “Customers want to know that the food they eat is safe.”

We couldn’t agree more!

For decades one of the justifications for farm policy has been to ensure that the American public has access to a safe and abundant supply of food and fiber. There is no question that this country has one of the safest food supplies in the world. However, recent events have caused us to wonder whether or not government cost considerations have had undue weight on safety decisions.

In our quest for increased access to international agricultural, manufacturing, and service sector markets, we seem to have assumed that our trading partners adhere to the same food safety standards that we take for granted. Because the presumption is that the wheat gluten we order is indeed wheat gluten, we regularly test only about 1 percent of the food ingredients coming into US ports.

Belatedly, we are talking about testing those ingredients coming in from China. At the same time we are pressing Chinese officials to tighten up their oversight to ensure that the food ingredients they ship to us are not contaminated.

And then there is the Creekstone case. At the same time that we are pressing our international trading partners to ensure the safety of the products we purchase from them, the USDA has filed an appeal of a judge’s ruling that allowed Creekstone Farms Premium Beef to voluntarily test all of its cattle for BSE.

Creekstone has been trying to obtain permission to test all of its beef as a means of regaining the confidence of the Japanese

customers they lost when BSE was discovered in a US slaughtered animal.

It is not just government costs that the USDA and Food and Drug Administration are taking into consideration. Among the reasons offered up for denying Creekstone is the idea that if the USDA allows one firm to test cattle for BSE, then all other firms might be forced to test their cattle as well.

In addition, it has been argued that allowing one firm to test for BSE might imply to the consumer that untested beef is unsafe. A third argument that widespread testing could lead to a false positive that would harm the beef industry. It is also argued that because current tests cannot detect BSE in younger animals, testing would give consumers a false sense of security.

In contrast to the China case, we have a firm that wants to test all of its product for a disease that some people are concerned about and the USDA is fighting to prohibit them from doing so.

Reputation, quality, and safety are often the key to a company’s reputation in the marketplace. Trust is vital in establishing and maintaining consumer confidence. As our friend said, “Consumers want to know that the food they eat is safe.”

We believe that a key component of public policy should be oriented toward assuring the public that we can provide them with the safest possible food supply.

If that means testing imported food ingredients, we should do it. If it means allowing companies to do more testing than required by law, we should permit them to do so. Let the public decide whether or not they want to pay a little more for the testing. If it means that we should put measures in place to make sure that the green onions we eat will not make us sick from *E. coli* contamination, then that is what we should do.

Too often our recent policy seems to be trying to lock the barn door after the horse has gotten out.

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