

Policy Pennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

"Food Safety is Job One": A uniform reality or an unachieved goal?

In the 1980s, Ford Motor Company introduced the slogan "Quality Is Job One" in order to meet the challenge posed by Japanese automakers who were capturing an increasing share of the US car market. This happened in part because Ford's inattention to quality issues had provided the basis for people to say that Ford meant Fix Or Repair Daily.

The US food system-from farm to fork-needs to take a page from history and begin to introduce policies and practices to convince the US public that "Food Safety Is Job One."

Most participants in direct sale Farmers Markets know that what they offer their customers is personal service and the perception of quality, and safety. If they fail on any one of those, they lose their credibility and their customers.

The bulk of our food, however, does not come from Farmers Markets. Instead it comes from large retailers who, for the most part, deal with large national processors and producers of the food we eat. The assumption has been that the food we eat is safe. But, the peanut butter, eggs, and repeated beef recalls have challenged that assumption.

A study released in September 2010 by the Union of Concerned Scientists titled, "Driving the Fox from the Henhouse: Improving Oversight of Food Safety at the FDA and USDA," provides a way for the US food system to show customers that "Quality is Job One." The full paper can be obtained at http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/scientific_integrity/driving-fox-from-henhouse-food-safety-report.pdf

The paper starts out asserting that the "government could do a much better job of preventing contaminated food from reaching Americans' plates in the first place." The paper then went on to describe the nature of their work: "in order to document the present state of affairs and determine specific needs, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), working with researchers at Iowa State University, sent a 44-question survey in March 2010 to some 8,000 employees with food safety responsibilities at the FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which together oversee our food supply.

"More than 1,700 responded. Their answers reveal a food safety system where, far too often, special interests and public officials inhibit the ability of government scientists and inspectors to protect us. The respondents also provided useful recommenda-

tions, informed by hard experience, on what must be done to correct this problem."

They concluded that "executive branch reforms-aimed at protecting government scientists, increasing transparency and accountability, and restoring scientific integrity-are needed to combat the political and corporate interference at the FDA and USDA. In addition, the laws governing the system badly need to be updated to meet 21st century challenges.

"Congress should give the FDA and USDA additional authority, such as the ability to: mandate food recalls, establish a science-based system for detecting harmful pathogens in the food supply, require food manufacturers to disclose more information to the government, and increase government surveillance of food imports. Congress also should provide adequate resources to more effectively police the food supply. Only then can the frequency and scale of foodborne disease outbreaks decline."

After reviewing the extent of the problem of foodborne illnesses, the authors look at the history and fragmented structure of the US federal food safety system. In addition to the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), "nearly a dozen other federal agencies are responsible for smaller components of the food safety system. This complex national enterprise is supplemented by many state and local food safety programs, which often serve as the front line for enforcement and response."

Within the USDA, seven sections "have responsibilities that touch on food safety." These include the FSIS that is "charged with ensuring that meat, poultry, and processed egg products are safe, wholesome, and properly labeled. The FSIS has a staff of 9,400, of which approximately 8,000 are inspectors who continuously oversee 6,300 meat-slaughtering and -processing establishments nationwide."

In addition to the FSIS, the Agricultural Research Service "Food Safety division...conducts research into a number of food safety topics and areas, often in support of FSIS activities or objectives." The Agricultural Marketing Service conducts a voluntary program that establishes quality standards and grades for a number of food products.

The Animal Plant Health Inspection Service is

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responsible for protecting animal and plant health in the United States by carrying out tests for the presence of invasive pests and diseases, such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or "mad cow" disease). While the Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration "implements a national quality-inspection system for grain and related products," it "has no regulatory responsibility for food safety," but reports problems it sees to the FDA.

The Food and Nutrition Service has a Food Safety unit as a part of its National School Lunch Program. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture supports food safety research through "federal grants to universities, nonprofits, small businesses, and others."

"The FDA-housed in the Department of HHS-is responsible for the safety, nutrition, wholesomeness, and accurate labeling of all domestic and imported human food products sold in interstate commerce, except for those regulated by the FSIS (i.e., meat, poultry, and processed egg products). In addition, a significant fraction of the FDA's budget goes toward implementing its drug safety responsibilities." While 80 percent of the food eaten in the US is under the FDA, the "FDA does not have [an] inspection capacity comparable to that of the USDA."

The USDA has three major units concerned with food safety: the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, the Center for Veterinary Medicine, and the

Office of Regulatory Affairs. "In August 2009, the Office of Foods was created to bring several of the FDA's food program components under one management structure."

Other agencies with food safety responsibilities include: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, the National Marine Fisheries Service, US Customs and Border Protection, and the Federal Trade Commission.

In addition "a wide variety of state and local health, agriculture, and consumer departments play crucial roles in the food safety system. These agencies typically take the lead on inspecting food establishments such as restaurants, grocery stores, and other retail outlets, while federal inspectors concentrate on food production and processing plants. The FDA also contracts with local agencies to help extend their limited inspection workforce."

Next week we will look at the legal, funding, and research aspects of food safety.

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