

## CAN WE TRUST WHAT WE EAT?

### Our faulty food system

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This week, New Jersey-based Topps Meat Company recalled 21.7 million pounds of frozen ground beef that has reportedly sickened 27 people across eight states with E. coli poisoning. Recent recalls of E. coli-contaminated Dole Hearts Delight bagged salad mix and salmonella-contaminated spinach produced by

California grower Metz Fresh are among the latest in a string of tainted food reaching the marketplace in what is one of the worst years for food safety in U.S. history. It was one year ago that spinach tainted with a particularly virulent form of E. coli ended up sickening more than 200 people and killing three across 26 states. From tainted produce to chili sauce, from ground beef to peanut butter, from snack food to pet food to seafood, examples of the Food and Drug Administration's and U.S. Department of Agriculture's inability to protect the food supply - due to lack of funding, staff and political leadership - have left consumers reeling.

The failure of government to safeguard the food supply is particularly evident when it comes to fresh-cut produce, most of which is grown in California. After nearly two dozen outbreaks of microbial contamination in leafy greens over the last decade, consumers are shocked to learn that FDA's safety standards for the growth and production of the nation's salad bowl are completely voluntary. They shake their heads to learn that FDA inspects companies growing and processing salad greens on average only once every 3.9 years, and inspects only 1 percent of the foods that are imported from other countries. Most disturbing is that FDA has no authority to recall contaminated foods.

Because of these colossal failures by FDA to ensure the safety of fresh produce, consumers are forced to rely on the food industry to police itself. Industry self-regulation rarely protects consumers and self-regulating is exactly what California's leafy green industry is doing. Because of plummeting consumer confidence, the leafy green industry lost as much as \$100 million in last year's deadly spinach E.coli outbreak. To plug this leak, and to avoid being regulated from outside, the industry - heavily influenced by Dole and other major players - developed its own safety standards, behind closed doors and without public comment. The industry appointed itself as the safety oversight board, including some of the very companies, such as Dole, which have been accused of marketing contaminated leafy greens. The resulting California Leafy Green Marketing Agreement, which is voluntary, was presented last October as the panacea for the safety of leafy greens. But if not all leafy greens in the marketplace are subject to the same safety standards, the door remains open for contaminated produce to reach consumers, as we have seen



over the last few weeks.

While our salad was being recalled, people began to get sick from Topps beef. It took 18 days for the USDA to issue a recall after Topps found the E. coli contamination. After USDA inspectors discovered inadequate safety controls at the Topps plant, the recall was expanded back a full year of production. A recall that is retroactive a year means that consumers might have already eaten much of the tainted hamburger.

At a time when public confidence in the safety of the food supply is extremely low, Congress is considering legislation as part of the Farm Bill that would provide potentially weaker safety oversight of the meat industry. The measure would allow small producers that ship their products out of state to forgo the federal inspection program in favor of state inspection programs. Moving to state inspections has the potential to result in more contamination problems, if state inspections turn out to be less rigorous, in practice, than the federal meat inspection.

Furthermore, no state has the authority to institute a recall of adulterated meat that has been shipped to another state. Congress is holding a number of hearings focusing on food safety. New legislation aimed at securing the safety of the food supply could well take the path of other food safety proposals of late, languishing from lack of political traction. Lawmakers should change this trend and act decisively and immediately to give the FDA and the USDA mandatory recall authority to remove tainted food from the marketplace. Furthermore, Congress should establish a single food safety agency to ensure better safety of our nation's food supply, with substantial resources to hire more inspectors and enforce Good Agricultural Practices (GAPS) and Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) programs at every farm and every processing facility. GAPS and HACCPs are generally recognized food safety

procedures and principles developed by academia, industry or government that are not universally enforced.

Until the highest safety standards are rigorously enforced by a single agency that has robust, mandatory authority to inspect food, farms and processors, and to recall contaminated foods from the marketplace, consumers should not stop worrying about the safety of their meal.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/10/05/EDAOSK7V2.DTL>

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