

Chew on food-safety reform

Monterey County Herald

July 26, 2009

Recalls of toxic or potentially toxic food products have become so routine that many of us barely pay attention unless we have just purchased some of the suspect substance.

Food-borne illness is a by-product of mass agricultural production, rapid worldwide trade and the inability of regulatory agencies to sample any significant portion of the products headed to our dinner tables.

Only last week, a batch of Salinas Valley lettuce was once again subject to a recall, this time because of salmonella detected in a sample of romaine tested in Wisconsin. Almost lost in the news coverage was the fact that most of the shipment apparently had been consumed without ill effect.

Still, the fear of contamination remains very real among consumers of a long list of food products, so the state and federal governments are examining ways to increase inspection and regulation. In some ways, closer attention by the regulators is overdue, but concern is mounting in several corners of agribusiness about the obvious possibility of counterproductive over-regulation.

Already, portions of the Salinas Valley are being stripped of natural vegetation to prevent contamination by wildlife that has not been implicated in past problems. Because of strict and largely unpublicized policies imposed by produce buyers, many growers locally and elsewhere say they have been forced to poison wildlife and destroy habitat, even riparian habitat theoretically protected by environmental regulations.

Just as consumer insistence on unblemished fruit led to overuse of pesticides, zero-tolerance rules imposed by buyers for large retailers have created unintended consequences, including virtual dead zones around some fields.

Even so, contamination continues.

In some cases, rules are being written even though the authors don't know what actually causes the problems they are addressing.

Often, the contamination is introduced at some less regulated point along the field-to-table trail.

Now, Congress is preparing for impending hearings on the so-called Food Safety Enhancement Act, by Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, which would give the Food and Drug Administration authority to regulate farms.

Some grower groups say they would welcome the change if new federal standards would get them out from under unattainable regionalized standards set by buyers.

Others, though, fear FDA regulation could eliminate some common practices in the organic produce industry, including use of composts and manure-based fertilizers.

Many who worry about the health of consumers and agriculture are concerned that Congress and the Obama administration could very well create a new universe of well-intentioned but impractical regulation.

One fear is that politicians will automatically approve any legislation that promises improved food safety even if the benefits are dubious and the costs excessive.

The subject matter is fully appropriate for serious federal review.

In some cases, California growers have been handicapped by their adherence to voluntary and state-imposed measures not followed by their competitors in other states.

But Congress should move cautiously in this area while remembering that a large percentage of the food consumed in the United States is imported untested from other countries with lesser standards.

Rather than focus on perception and politics, Congress needs to have clear and measurable results in mind before it creates any new rules or bureaucracies, and it should work very closely with the industry.