

Improve Food Safety and Quality through Greater Information, Consumer Choice, and Legal Accountability

Few issues are as important to consumers as the safety and quality of their food—from microbial contaminants to pesticides, and from organics to obesity. Recent health scares—from *E. coli*-contaminated spinach and tomatoes to melamine-contaminated infant formula and pet food—show just how fragile the food chain can be. But, while these tragic events have led to calls for greater government regulation of the food supply, the nature of these scares shows that additional regulations or inspections are likely to do little to improve food safety. Indeed, poorly conceived government regulation often does as much to compromise food safety, affordability, and choice as to promote it—especially when the regulatory framework is focused on a fear-driven activist agenda rather than on basic principles of science and genuine safety.

Too often, the government’s regulatory agenda favors politically expedient outcomes over those that would actually promote safety and availability. For example, the U.S. government maintains outmoded “poke and sniff” food inspectors whose methods are incapable of preventing food-borne illnesses, while making it difficult to introduce such technologies as irradiation that could cut the incidence of those illness by half or more. Americans consume nearly 1 billion meals every day. Merely adding additional inspectors cannot realistically be

expected to prevent future contaminations. Instead, the legal system should punish producers and sellers who are negligent in the handling or purchasing of the foods we eat. Food companies should be allowed the flexibility to adopt technologies and practices that can cut the incidence of food-borne contaminants.

In addition, regulators control the content of food labels so stringently that sellers are often forbidden from informing consumers of many beneficial product attributes. Food safety and labeling regulations should be designed with maximum flexibility, to allow food producers to use the production methods and labeling information that best meet their customers’ demands. Government studies have shown that reduced labeling and advertising restrictions on food products actually leads producers to supply healthier and more nutritious products, increasing consumer well-being.

- *Lawmakers should eliminate regulatory barriers that make it harder to adopt new food production technologies, such as irradiation and crop biotechnology, which can improve food safety.* For example, mandatory labeling of irradiated food provides no useful or material information to consumers, but it does scare consumers and retailers away from safe irradiated foods. Existing USDA rules make it impossible for cattle

ranchers to voluntarily test their herds for mad cow disease and then advertise the attribute to consumers.

- *Policy makers should abandon the misguided notion that natural products are inherently safe and synthetic products inherently dangerous.* Synthetic compounds, as a class, are no more toxic or carcinogenic than compounds that exist in nature. The dose makes the poison—many substances that are dangerous at very high levels are totally harmless at lower levels. This is true for both natural and manmade substances. Rules that mandate labeling of even trace amounts of certain synthetic chemicals are

based on a faulty understanding of science and are therefore bad public policy.

- *Government should not make lifestyle choices for consumers regarding the foods they eat.* All foods, whether they contain large amounts of fat, calories, sugar, sodium, or other constituents, can be a part of a healthy diet. Consumers may benefit from having accurate information about nutrition, calories, and fat content, but government should not ban or otherwise limit consumer access to foods simply because public health officials believe that some consumers overindulge.

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