# 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 salmonella-contaminated eggs to E. coli-contaminated spinach and tomatoes—show just how fragile the food chain can be. But, while these tragic events have led to calls for greater government oversight of the food supply, the nature of these scares shows that additional regulations or inspections are likely to do little to improve food safety. 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 visual examination and "poke and sniff" food inspectors whose methods are incapable of detecting microbial pathogens. At the same time, heavy regulatory burdens make it difficult to introduce technologies, such as irradiation, that could cut the incidence of those pathogens by half or more. Americans consume nearly 1 billion meals every day, and microbial pathogens can be introduced at any stage in the food production and distribution system. 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 foodborne 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 liberalizing 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 beneficial new food production technologies, such as irradiation and crop biotechnology.** 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 U.S. Department of Agriculture 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 certain foods simply because public health officials believe that some consumers overindulge in them.

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