

# Food, Drugs, and Consumer Freedom

Few matters are as important to consumers as the foods they eat, the medicines they put in their bodies, and the ways they choose to spend their time and money. Fortunately, the number of choices we have as consumers has never been greater. The quality and affordability of foods, medicines, and other consumer products have never been better. Nevertheless, many self-described consumer activists insist that government do more to control the availability, safety, and cost of the products we want and need. Consumers have exacting demands for the products they buy and use, and they, not government, are generally the best judges of the value and quality of individual products and services.

Consumers want products that are safe and effective, along with a broad range of choices and affordable prices. Government regulation of food, drugs, and other consumer products is generally intended to ensure safety, but one-size-fits-all regulation is often poorly suited for ensuring safety for a wide range of consumers with highly individualized needs. Other rules are explicitly intended to reduce choices or to discourage consumers from choosing particular goods or services. Whatever the rationale, government regulation necessarily reduces choice and imposes costs on producers and consumers, leading to higher prices in the marketplace.

Legislators and regulators also respond to political pressures, so rules are often motivated by fear-driven activist agendas, rather than basic principles of science, or by a desire to control the choices consumers make “for their own good.” In such cases,

governments too often tend to restrict the use of products and technologies that activists consider risky, but are nevertheless safer than the alternatives. When that happens, genuine safety can be compromised. The result of politically driven regulation is not a safer, more secure, and more prosperous world, but one that is poorer, less fair, and often less safe. Consumers are best helped not by heavy-handed restrictions but by vigorous competition in the marketplace by producers competing with one another to supply consumer demands and needs.

It is essential then, that government regulation of consumer choices be limited to policing the marketplace to ensure that consumers are not misled by false claims. Product safety and labeling regulations should be designed with maximum flexibility to allow producers to offer the products and use the production methods that best meet their customers' demands. Where safety restrictions are truly needed to protect consumers or the environment, quality standards should be based on the best available scientific data, while allowing producers and consumers the widest possible range of choice.