

A Broken System

It used to be shopping at the local grocery store for items like tomatoes, peppers, or peanut butter was a safe thing to do. Our only worries were dodging misplaced grocery carts, not getting stuck in the slow checkout lane and deciding between paper and plastic. Unfortunately one of the biggest hazards we encounter in the grocery store today is the food itself.

Comment [TAB1]: Good, eye-catching start.

Recently, we have seen items recalled from the shelves and have had to rummage through our pantries for fear that the food we are feeding our families is unsafe. According to the Center for Disease Control, the most recent outbreak of salmonella in peanut butter resulted in nine deaths, hundreds of people sickened, and millions of dollars in losses from recalled products.

As individual consumers we are not equipped to test the food we purchase to ensure that it will not make us sick. Instead we trust that appropriate regulations are in place to ensure the safety of the food supply. Unfortunately, each year about 76 million people in the United States are sickened by contaminated food, hundreds of thousands are hospitalized and about 5,000 die, public health experts estimate. It is evident that the food safety system in the U.S. is broken.

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Comment [TAB2]: Which ones? Still, so far so good.

One of the major problems with our regulatory system is no one agency is responsible. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office “federal oversight of food safety is fragmented, with 15 agencies collectively administering at least 30 laws related to food safety”. In addition to federal regulation agencies, all 50 states have varying levels of regulatory authority.

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Regulation is supposed to occur routinely from the processing plant (or point of entry into the U.S.) through to the point of sale. However according to The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the main agency in charge of this systematic food regulation, they inspect only 1% of the food supply and perform laboratory samples on even less than that.

Recent outbreaks highlight the fact that the FDA has insufficient resources to regulate the United States’ complex food production and distribution system, which in turn creates opportunities for unsafe products to enter the food supply.

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Just this month, President Obama called the food safety system a "hazard to public health." President Obama feels the situation is so urgent that over \$1 billion will be allocated within this year's budget for FDA's efforts to "increase and improve inspections, domestic surveillance, laboratory capacity, and domestic response to prevent and control food borne illness."

Fixing a system as large as the food safety industry is not something that can happen overnight, and to guide that effort President Obama has announced the formation of the Food Safety Working Group. This group will be chaired by Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture, and Kathleen Sebelius, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, of which FDA is a part.

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In addition to the formation of the working group, members of Congress are also busy working on changes to the food regulatory system. Representative DeLauro from Connecticut recently introduced The Food Safety and Modernization Act of 2009, which seeks to remove oversight from the FDA and create a new regulatory agency. Additionally, Representative John Dingell from Michigan introduced the Food and Drug Administration Globalization Act of 2009, which seeks to create additional funds for the FDA by charging manufacturers a registration fee.

This increased focus on the food safety system is crucial to reforming this critical regulatory system; in Government however true reform is rare and often all that is produced is reports and speeches. As citizens we need to demand that executive working groups, congressional hearings, and legislation in committee produce results that go beyond words and reports and are implementable and effective.

The original Foods and Drugs Act and the first Meat Inspections Act were passed by the U.S. Congress in 1906, and today's basic structure of our food safety system remains the same as when these acts were implemented. A fundamental review of our century old system is needed. However, for this review to be comprehensive, it must include local and state health officials as well as consumer interest groups.

Food manufacturing and distribution is big business -- the FDA alone regulates \$417 billion worth of domestic food and \$49 billion worth of imported food each year. It is important that citizens let their representatives know that fixing the food safety system is important, and that the process

should not be dominated by the food industry. I urge you to let your representatives know the only health hazards we will expect at the grocery store are in the junk food aisle.

Comment [TAB3]: I don't know how I feel about this—it's catchy, but could put some people off.