

Globalization, FDA Cutbacks Lead To Increased U.S. Food Poisoning

by Marcia Merry Baker

A fact sheet, “Weaknesses in FDA’s Food Safety System,” was released Oct. 30 by Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.), the ranking minority member of the Committee on Government Reform of the House of Representatives. As the five-page document explained, “The growing incidence of contamination in fresh produce is a symptom of weaknesses in the federal food safety system” of the United States. The fact sheet, excerpted below, gives dramatic summary documentation of what is lacking in the Food and Drug Administration’s ability to inspect fruits and vegetables, and enforce their safety.

But to restore food reliability, it is essential to stop the underlying process which is favoring pathogens and the breakdown in food safety: the globalization of farm and food systems. The kinds of outbreaks of human, livestock, and plant bacterial diseases now seen in the United States and worldwide, are inherently furthered by free-trade food supply patterns. The food chain is stretched out over long distances; it involves cheap labor, low-infrastructure farming and processing, long-haul shipping, and highly concentrated control over distribution. Therefore, instead of any farm or food disaster being a “local” setback, which can be contained and minimized, it automatically becomes a multi-state or international event.

The flip side of the U.S. disease outbreaks, is the hunger and misery imposed on the food-export nations by globalization. For example, in the 1960s, Mexico had a grain surplus. Now, under free trade, official UN-designated “hunger zones” are spreading in the nation.

U.S. Foodborne Disease Outbreaks

The August-October 2006 fresh spinach *Escherichia coli* episode makes the point. Persons were infected in 26 states with a virulent *E. coli* 0157:H7 strain, causing at least 102 people to be hospitalized, 31 cases of hemolytic uremic syndrome, three confirmed deaths, and two more likely, but unverifiable. Given that epidemiologists think that for every confirmed case, there are 20 more, some 2,000 people were affected.

The source of the tainted produce was traced to one location in the Salinas Valley in California, from which—under characteristic globalization practices—more than 70% of U.S.-produced fresh spinach is now supplied. Once an unfor-

tunate contamination event occurred, its effects hit half the country.

Now, just weeks later, a new 19-state disease outbreak has occurred. This time it’s *Salmonella*, also thought to be carried by fresh produce. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a press release Nov. 1, reporting that 171 cases of salmonellosis were officially recorded over the September-October period, with dozens more persons likely to have been affected. The suspect vector is contaminated fresh tomatoes—though this may remain unconfirmed.

At least 14 people were hospitalized. The serotype is *Salmonella* typhimurium, one of the most common five out of the 2,500 known types of *Salmonella*. The outbreak was on the wane by November; it was originally identified in mid-October, when a national CDC database showed a pattern of food-borne illnesses being reported, mostly in the Eastern states; and DNA-fingerprinting confirmed the common type of pathogen.

The Waxman fact sheet stresses the point, referring back to the spinach *E. coli* event: “This most recent outbreak is not an isolated occurrence. The outbreak is the 20th outbreak of *E. coli* in fresh produce since 1995, and the second outbreak specifically linked to spinach. Produce-related outbreaks have doubled from 44 outbreaks in 1998 to 86 in 2004. Overall, an estimated 76 million cases of foodborne disease occur each year in the United States, causing about 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths annually.” More and more of these are from fresh produce.

Federal officials are downplaying the scale and causes of foodborne illness. At an Oct. 11 event held by the Food Marketing Institute in Washington, D.C., Undersecretary for Agriculture for Food Safety Richard Raymond reviewed the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control, stressing their estimate that there has been a decline in the incidence of most major foodborne illnesses in the United States since 1996—*Listeria*, *Campylobacter*, *Yersinia*, *Shigella*, *E. coli*, *Cryptosporidium*, and *Salmonella*. The CDC operates a FoodNet surveillance program, and uses a statistical model to estimate rate changes since its baseline period.

However, the CDC’s statistical orientation is itself a problem. To begin with, only one of the five most common serotypes of *Salmonella*—typhimurium—has declined; the others have increased. Cases of *Vibrio* have increased an



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Salmonella typhimurium (center) is but one of the contaminants infesting more and more of America's food supply, particularly fruits and vegetables, because of the nation's increasing dependence on globalization. While the United States relies on more imports from such conglomerates as Chiquita/Fresh Express, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's food division has had its budget effectively cut by a quarter since 2003.

estimated 41% since the baseline period. For *Campylobacter*, most of the decline came before 2001, so what is happening as of now? The rate of *Listeria* was higher in 2005 than in 2002.

But beyond all this, there is the simple fact that certain Federal safety measures were taken in the meat and dairy chain to damp down the likelihood of bacterial contamination over the past 10 years, but not so in the fresh fruits and vegetables chain. One study found that of 3,500 outbreaks of food poisoning from 1990 to 2003, contaminated produce was the main cause, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Fresh produce procurement and marketing have seen dramatic changes under globalization during the past 15 years. In the 1960s, fruits and vegetables for fresh consumption were produced across a number of U.S. states, and handled by a wide network of decentralized shippers, wholesalers, and retailers.

This has all changed. Foremost is the shift to imports. For example, in the 1960s, only 6% of fresh tomatoes were imported; today, more than 30%. Even higher percentages exist for green onions, asparagus, green beans, and many other foods. About 43% of all U.S. agricultural imports in 2003 were horticultural products. Mexico alone was the source of 27% of U.S. fruit imports and 38% of vegetable imports. At the same time, what used to be called "truck gardening" around U.S. metropolitan areas, is gone; farm production today is concentrated in fewer and fewer counties.

Secondly, the fresh produce imports go into volume-

shipments to the "hypermarkets"—Wal-Mart, Costco, Target, and others—and to the mega-food service companies, for nationwide distribution. In the process, the cartel companies have enforced more and more brand-name control. In 1987, "branded" fresh fruits and vegetables were under 7% of sales, but by 1997 were 19%. Fresh-cut, packaged salads rose from 1% to 15% of sales over this period. By June 2005, one company, Chiquita/Fresh Express, had more than 40% of the U.S. packaged salad market.

In short, all along the line—from field, to enclosed packaging, to nationwide distribution—conditions are enhanced for microbial threats to thousands of people.

FDA Weaknesses

Now view the Food and Drug Administration work in this context. Among the points noted in the Waxman Fact Sheet are:

Underfunding: "Food safety funding has not kept pace with rising costs and new responsibilities. Nominal funds for FDA food programs have risen from \$407 million in 2003 to \$439 million in 2006. . . [but] the agency's food division operated under a shortfall of \$135 million in 2006 due to

increased personnel costs and new terrorism responsibilities." An official described this as "equivalent to a 24% budget cut."

Function Cuts: "Under the Bush Administration's fiscal year 2007 budget proposal, produce safety and other base food programs would be cut by \$22.6 million from 2006 levels, and staffing would be reduced by 105 full-time employees to fund "priority initiatives such as food defense and pandemic influenza," according to FDA documents.

Fewer Inspectors: "FDA inspectors are responsible for overseeing approximately 210,000 domestic food establishments. Since 2003, however, the number of field staff, primarily inspectors and inspection support staff, has dropped by 12%, from 2,217 to 1,962."

Fewer Inspections: "In 1972, FDA conducted approximately 50,000 food safety inspections. In fiscal year 2003, FDA conducted only 13,567 domestic food safety inspections. According to FDA budget documents, this number will drop even further to 9,255 inspections in fiscal year 2006. This is a 32% drop in federal inspections since 2003—and an 81% drop since 1972."

Inadequate Fresh Produce Regulations: "FDA last updated the regulations that establish good manufacturing practices for food safety in 1986. In their current form, these regulations do not specifically address processes used for fresh produce. The rules also do not describe specific practices for packaged fresh produce, which was not a significant market item in 1986."