



Opinion:

Redesigning our food system

by Scott Exo, Executive Director

February 16, 2009

Salmonella in peanut products has now sickened more than 500 people in 43 states. This comes on the heels of a record recall of 143 million pounds of beef in 2008, and is only the most recent in a string of food safety scares affecting peppers, spinach, pet food, and other products.

Unfortunately, many of the solutions offered for the food safety crisis - More testing! Irradiation! Eliminate wildlife habitat on farms! - treat the symptoms rather than the underlying causes.

The public has good reason to question whether our current food system really serves their interest – and farmers should be asking the same thing. Books by Eric Schlosser, Michael Pollan and others underscore industrial agriculture's treatment of farm workers and farm animals, and its impacts on the environment. The very strength of modern agribusiness - its ability to produce, process, distribute and mass market huge quantities of cheap food - becomes a weakness when salmonella-tainted products can appear overnight on grocery store shelves across the country.

Perhaps we could work together to deliberately redesign our nation's food system to provide safe, healthy, affordable food for all our citizens, while also providing a reasonable return to farmers, safe and fair conditions for farm workers, humane treatment of animals, healthy soils, clean air and clean water.

How might a redesigned food system help serve all those purposes?

First, our food and all its ingredients should carry into the marketplace the identities and reputations of those who produced it. In the commodity system, ingredients are often anonymous and may be blended from sources anywhere in the world. We can evaluate an anonymous ingredient on its relative quality or price. But if it doesn't carry the face of the farmer who produced it, we can't fully judge whether it serves our broader food interests.

Second, the companies that bring us our food should be transparent about their management standards, practices and outcomes. The problem now is often that we simply don't know how our food was produced. Was this strawberry sprayed with a particular pesticide? When? Did the workers have proper safety training and equipment? Did the

farmer get a price that covered her cost of production? With more transparency, we can make more informed decisions.

Third, there should be accountability, and systems to assure buyers that the claims made about particular food products are true. Even more importantly, buyers should be clear about their values, and how they prioritize questions of cost, quality, health, safety, and impact on society and the environment. They should put their money where their mouths are.

The good news is that a growing number of consumers are demanding more from food than cheapness and safety. Consumers are re-discovering the unique bounty and freshness of local and regional foods. They are enjoying a stronger sense of connection to their communities and the land - and in the process creating important economic opportunities for new and existing farmers, often on smaller acreages.

We think support for local and regional food will only grow. Realistically, though, most consumers will still want a wide variety of foods available throughout the year. This means meeting our food needs will require innovative strategies that aggregate product from larger farms and across broader, regional "foodsheds."

There is good news here, too. Industry is taking note that expectations for food are changing.

A new report of consumer research by the Hartman Group, auspiciously titled "The Rise of Consumer Responsibility," points out that "the only bright lights in the otherwise gloomy economic realities of late 2008 lie in those topics that intersect with sustainability." A National Restaurant Association survey of 1,600 professional chefs predicts, "In 2009, we will see healthier menu options with an emphasis on produce and fruit, smaller dishes and fish, and an increase in the use of local and sustainable ingredients." The Grocery Manufacturers Association, in predictions for 2009, notes, "Sustainability will not only continue to gain prominence in the mainstream, but this year, some think it could even become a standard."

Encouraging words in these tough times, indeed. But if we expect "sustainability" to be more than a marketing buzzword, if we want to change the system rather than treat the symptoms, we have to know both where our food comes from and how it's grown. If consumers are ready to hold themselves and industry accountable for all the good that a more socially and environmentally responsible food system can bring, we must demand that the identity of the farms be preserved, that production practices are transparent, and that both are properly rewarded.

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