

A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

A Call to Farms



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Food Safety Policy on the Move?

While concepts such as sustainability and local production, through, for example, the mechanism of geographical indications, have a long tradition in Europe, there are relatively newer in the U.S. and still trying to find a footing there. What is not new, however, is the concept of food safety. This is a topic with a long and storied history in the U.S. One only needs to go back to the early 1900s and the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* to see how food safety has captured public attention in the U.S.

Sinclair's purpose for writing the book was actually to document the abysmal labor conditions of workers in the meatpacking industry in Chicago. What grabbed headlines upon publication of the book, however, was the potential for contaminated beef as a result of the production conditions. The public outcry caused foreign sales of US beef to fall by at least 50%. This led the meatpackers (highly concentrated then and still so today) to lobby for federal legislation on food safety, particularly inspection and certification. The result was the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 and the creation of the Bureau of Chemistry which became the Food and Drug Administration.

Thus, food safety is never very far out of the equation when it comes to any food and agriculture legislation in the U.S. This year, both chambers of the U.S. Congress are working on food safety legislation (known as S. 510 and H.R. 2749) intended to update the existing Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. The two bills are pretty similar, and useful summary overviews are available here <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s111-510&tab=summary> and <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-2749&tab=summary>)

Among the most significant provisions of this legislation are the following:

- Requires food facilities to conduct hazard analysis, create food safety plans, and implement controls
- Allows the FDA Director to order immediate and mandatory recalls or quarantines based on safety concerns
- Requires country of origin labelling and inspections of foreign food facilities

One needs to understand the scope of the legislation. It applies only to that part of the food chain regulated by FDA and not the Department of Agriculture (i.e., not meat, poultry, egg or milk products among others). There was significant concern among small farmers and the organic/sustainable agriculture movement during the early stages

of the drafting of these bills. The concern centered on whether the requirements for hazard analysis, food safety plans, and control systems would be so costly as to put direct sales arrangements and farmers markets out of business.

This concern is a bit overblown as farms, private residences, restaurants, other retail food establishments, and nonprofit food banks and distributors are exempt from the bill's requirements. This is well explained by Bill Marler on his "food safety" blog here <http://www.marlerblog.com/2009/08/articles/awyer-oped/a-friday-and-saturday-night-read-hr-2749-food-safety-enhancement-act-2009-so-whats-really-in-it/index.html>. As an aside, for those who do not know Bill Marler he is an excellent source of information on food safety and other related legislative and policy developments.

However, the bills could no doubt be improved, particularly from a sustainable or quality agriculture perspective. Marler suggests the bills should raise more money from producers and redirect the money toward state and local health and agriculture authorities for work on food safety. He also suggests that more policy work is necessary to balance energy, environment, and biodiversity with the ultimate goal of having a food policy that creates healthy humans. It is hard to argue with that.

News

Chocolate (along with coffee) is one of the products most often used to attach additional production process attributes beyond organic. Early examples included fair trade and shade grown. Earlier in the year, one of the larger Swiss producers of chocolates for store and other private brands announced that exports of organic and fair trade chocolates were holding steady and did not appear to be damaged by the recession thus demonstrating the resiliency of these concepts (see – <http://www.chocolatier-suisse.ch/cms/upload/halba2/files/IntranetCoo pJuli2009e.pdf>

Meanwhile, in the US, Whole Foods Markets is offering Climate Change Chocolate –

www.climatechangechocolate.com/ – a product which is actually produced in Switzerland. This product allows consumers to offset 133 pounds of carbon dioxide (the average carbon impact per day of a person in the US) by purchasing a 3.5 oz chocolate bar. Whether this is a gimmick or has lasting effect may be up for debate but certainly there is burgeoning trend here that producers will try to tap into. Some more information on the design aspect of the product is here <http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=10207>

Back over to Europe the Belgian producer, Dolfin, claims to be the first major Belgian producer to have become climate neutral in its own production processes. This involves claiming credit for carbon offsets, the same mechanism being used by Climate Change Chocolate. More information here – www.dolfin.be/index.php?lang=En&page=environment

Meanwhile the Dagoba chocolate company – www.dagobachocolate.com/circle.asp – touts itself as embracing Full Circle Sustainability Principles in its production. What exactly that means is a bit unclear but it is definitely embracing elements of fair trade, carbon neutrality, and sustainable development. Dagoba was sold to the US company Hershey (raising questions for those who do not believe that large corporations can truly embrace sustainability principles) and the founder of Dagoba, Frederick Schilling, moved on to start a new venture, Big Tree Climate Fund (www.bigtreeclimatefund.com) to offer carbon offsets.

The goal for Big Tree Climate is to ensure that more of the value of the offsets is captured locally by those who tend the forests and trees. Some background information on the motivation for the venture is here – www.elephantjournal.com/2009/06/dagoba-chocolate-big-tree-climate-fund-sustainably-minded/

The above list of developments is by no means complete but rather just a snapshot of the innovations that are occurring. Clearly there is potential for overlap and some

confusion among the different production process attributes. Labeling, while helpful, can also be confusing to consumers given the number of different labels that are possible and the different certifying bodies with which producers have to contend. One wonders if it is not possible to have a single uber-label or concept that provides an umbrella under which various attributes can be mixed and matched in different forms. Geographical Indications might be one possibility here although that would require all producers of a given product in a given geographic area to sign up to the same set of attributes. In any case, while the path forward may not always be clear, there is clearly a significant amount of innovation occurring. A lot of this is being debated within the EU in the context of their revision of the quality agriculture policy http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/quality/policy/chrono_en.htm

Resources

Concentration in the food system is always a concern especially in light of the significant commodity and food price increases that happened in 2006-2007. The Government Accountability Office has released a report containing the results of its recent analysis (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d09746r.pdf>) While the report notes concentration has increased it does not find evidence that this materially contributed to food price increases.

The potential reasons for GAO producing this report and particularly its timing, are outline by Marion Nestle on her food policy blog (<http://www.foodpolitics.com/2009/08/concentration-in-agriculture/>) This issue will grow as the US Departments of Justice and Agriculture announced public forums on the issue (www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2009/August/09-ag-

[771.html](#)). Workshops will be held in Washington, D.C. and around the country.

CROPP Cooperative is the owner of the Organic Valley Family of Farms brand label that provides organic farmers a collective marketing mechanism. Begun in 1988 with seven farmers it now brings together over 1300 farmers with the goal of sharing profits between farmers, employees, and the community. CROPP also offers the chance for individuals to invest and receive a 6% dividend. It is limited to residents of certain US states. More information on this innovative approach can be found here - www.organicvalley.coop/our-story/invest/

There is a growing trend in Japan for individuals to become part time farmers. Called the Half Farmer/Half X lifestyle it is partly a response to difficult economic times, partly a response to environmental concerns, and partly a response to questions of identity and self discovery. A brief article on the trend can be found here - www.japanfs.org/en/mailmagazine/newsletter/pages/028996.html

Upcoming Events

10 Dec: Recently the international Slow Food movement decided to initiate an annual Terra Madre Day. The first will be held 10 Dec 2009. Terra Madre is Slow Food's network to connect those who wish to act to preserve, encourage, and support sustainable food production methods. Deliberately anti-global, its methods are focused on attention to territory and those distinctive qualities that have permitted the land to retain its fertility over centuries of use. Info - www.terramadre.org/welcome.lasso

