

Food Safety?

by Dave Runsten, Executive Director

To paraphrase the poet Adrienne Rich, I would have liked to have lived in a world where we could construct local food systems with sustainable family farms and not worry about real estate developers, global warming, or food safety. There are many days where I wonder if what we are building can endure, as we have to devote so much time to defending it.

Lately we have been cast into the perplexing role of defending organic farming practices, having animals on farms, conservation plantings, and a whole host of historic and natural farming practices, in the face of food safety mania. The most recent causes are the spinach and lettuce incidents with E. coli 0157:H7 contamination of the past year.

The fresh-cut salad industry—which produces those bags of greens you see in the supermarket—has formed a state marketing agreement for handlers of “leafy green vegetables,” which they define broadly to include kale, chard and vegetables that usually are not sold in plastic bags, and are often cooked. Leafy greens handlers can sign up and pledge to enforce food safety standards (“metrics” produced by Western Growers) on farms supplying them. Handlers who don’t want to sign the market agreement are threatened with being cut off by retailers.

There is talk of moving from a marketing agreement to a marketing order, which would make participation mandatory. Every farmer who sold leafy greens to a “handler” of produce (i.e. not directly to a consumer, retailer, or restaurant) would become subject to these metrics and to audits, even though no consideration has been given to the negative impacts such metrics and audits would have on small or organic farmers. The record-keeping requirements alone would be virtually impossible for a small organic farm producing multiple crops in sequence.

I have no doubt that the fresh-cut salad industry has a food safety problem, because the retailers, attorneys, and insurance companies are telling them they do. The majority of recent incidents were linked to bagged produce. The chlorine wash water they are using may be ineffective at removing E. coli 0157:H7. They ship bags with a 17-day shelf life, labeled “ready to eat.” But rather than focusing on their problems, they seek to mount a public relations campaign that focuses on farmers and wildlife, blaming birds and pigs and deer.

Food safety rules written by the industry for the industry should not be applied to every farmer in California until someone demonstrates that there is a real problem with production outside the industrial system. We support the creation of appropriate food safety measures for small and organic farms, not a one-size-fits-all approach.

My idea of safe food is food grown on bio-diverse farms, places where there are a plethora of micro-organisms to control pathogenic bacteria, and I believe that research will eventually demonstrate that natural, balanced processes are the correct way to deal with this problem. Just as the “sterile” environment of a hospital gives rise to the most deadly bacteria, so the sterile fields of the industrial food system provide nothing to control the pathogens.

If this industrial approach to food safety in leafy greens succeeds, it could be applied to tomatoes, melons and other crops in California. The food safety auditors will demand such things as fences for wildlife, when there is no scientific evidence that wildlife is a problem. If you don't want to farm under these conditions—or if you are a consumer who would like to see sustainable local produce continue to appear in stores and restaurants—then I suggest you contact your local Farm Bureau and Governor Schwarzenegger and let them know that you do not think they are on the right track. You can find more information on our web site, www.caff.org, by hitting the food safety button on the home page.

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