

American food safety system needs an overhaul

by *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Safeguards that are supposed to protect Americans from tainted food are obsolete, ineffective and in urgent need of revision.

More than a dozen federal agencies are responsible for some aspect of food safety. Among them is the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which also promotes food production. Federal officials lack the authority to order recalls in most cases and rely on outdated technologies and inspection practices. They have too few people and too little money.

The latest evidence of the system's failure: A California processor recalled 2 million pounds of pistachios this week because of possible salmonella contamination. Setton Pistachio, the nation's second-largest processor, reportedly knew about contamination in some of its products because of internal testing. That should have been a red flag about wider problems in its processing plant.

But no law requires the company to notify state or federal regulators. Instead of looking for the source of the problem, the company simply reroasted the nuts in an effort to kill the bacteria and then shipped them to about 35 wholesalers and food manufacturers.

Tests by one customer uncovered the tainted pistachio nuts. That company finally notified federal officials on March 24.

That's painfully reminiscent of the prelude to another massive nut recall less than two months ago. That case involved a Georgia peanut processor whose own internal tests repeatedly uncovered evidence contamination. But the company wasn't required to notify federal or state safety agencies or to shut down production.

Tainted peanuts shipped by that company are thought to have sickened nearly 700 people. At least eight deaths are tied to the outbreak.

At a Congressional hearing on food safety this week, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the Obama administration is committed to improving oversight. But it's going to take congressional action to make the kind of sweeping, fundamental changes needed.

A new report from Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recommends concrete steps to create an integrated food safety system. Specifically:

â€” Laws should be updated to give the U.S. Food and Drug Administration â€” responsible for about 80 percent of the nation's food supply â€” greater legal authority to order changes in production processes or recalls when suspect food has been shipped.

â€” A single food safety agency should be created to centralize responsibility and accountability.

â€” Agency budgets, long underfunded, must be increased to buy newer technology and hire additional staff.

â€” Coordination between federal and state inspection services must be improved, and industry standards that often are voluntary must be mandatory. Companies must be required to notify food safety agencies when contaminated product is discovered.

Lawmakers already have introduced legislation to improve federal oversight. But industry involvement also is crucial. The majority of companies that follow good manufacturing processes are natural allies in the effort to prevent and detect contamination, because their business is harmed seriously by the constant stream of recalls and safety warnings.

The nation's food safety system hasn't kept pace with rapid changes in global food supply â€” the explosion of processing facilities here and the transportation improvements that bring the world's agricultural bounty into American supermarkets. That has to change soon.

To keep relying on an inspection system designed in the early 20th century to protect against 21st century problems is worse than naive, it's just plain nuts.

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