

REAL FOOD SAFETY

Americans will eat more imported food than ever this year. The U.S. is expected to import \$70 billion in agricultural products, double the amount in 1997, according to the Department of Agriculture. But just 1.3 percent of imported fish, vegetables, fruit, and other food is inspected. More and more imported foods, including the suspected melamine tainted products, originate in China, a nation struggling with its own food safety problems.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is in charge of ensuring food safety for pets and people alike, has been criticized on Capitol Hill for responding too slowly to the contamination and for not monitoring both domestic and imported food more closely. Although China has now banned melamine from food products, that alone won't solve U.S. food safety woes. A recent editorial in the Washington Post calls for the FDA to have "a more rigorous inspection system, rather than simply taking importers at their word in many cases."

During oversight hearings about the recall in mid-April, Senator Richard J. Durbin (D-Illinois) compared the pet food recall to the broader problem of relying on one agency to monitor the safety of the nation's food supply. "It's the same broken food safety system," he said.

The FDA's problems go well beyond being able to monitor foreign imports. According to reports, the agency knew full well that there were problems at the ConAgra plant that produced peanut butter tainted with Salmonella, as well as at California spinach farms that made headlines last year after an E. coli outbreak killed three people and sickened hundreds.

But because of a lack of funding and institutional authority, the FDA lacks control over the very food system it was created to protect. It cannot force companies to recall products - it depends on them to police themselves, which has become a risky proposition as the industrial food system grows.

And the agency is responsible for 60,000-80,000 facilities every year, making it almost impossible to investigate every problem. Democrats are calling for a complete overhaul of the agency that would give it more authority to go after companies selling unsafe food.

In the meantime, consumers can help ensure the safety of their food supply by buying products grown and produced closer to home - at farmers' markets, local food co-ops, and restaurants that source their food from local farmers. By doing this, they can get more information about how the food they eat was raised and have confidence it was not treated with chemicals to help it survive long-distance travel.

Buying local also gives people the chance to get to know the people who raised their food and to feel good about supporting their local economies.

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