



Food Safety Is A Retail Issue

It is easy to perceive the spinach/*E. coli* 0157:H7 situation as a crisis for farmers. The water supply in Salinas, the location of cows, the frequency of water testing, the cleanliness of machinery — all these are, seemingly, producer issues.

Yet the food safety issues surrounding this type of outbreak are, most decidedly, retail issues at their core.

It seems unlikely that we will ever achieve zero presence of microbial factors on produce, especially fresh-cuts, so one important area of food safety is how effectively the cold chain is maintained so those microbes won't multiply. Retailers are quick to demand third party audits and other proof of compliance from growers and packers. Are any retailers willing to submit their own operations to the same standard of test?

- Is there one retailer in the nation willing to get a third party auditor to certify all its display cases are compliant, including places far from the blower and during the defrost cycle?

- Is there one retailer in the nation willing to get a third party auditor to certify its receiving procedures, that the cold chain doesn't get broken at store level while produce is unloaded and that things aren't going wrong somewhere else in the retail distribution channel?

- When my local pizzeria delivers a pizza, it packs the cardboard box in a thermal package to try to maintain the temperature. Which retail chains are telling their customers it is unacceptable to have produce sitting in a hot car trunk while bacteria grows so bring a cooler or we'll package the vulnerable products in a thermal bag? Or will retailers insist on washing their hands of responsibility the minute the consumer walks out the door?

Beyond these specific retail responsibilities, though, there is a greater sense in which these kinds of outbreaks are always a function of what level of preventive care retailers want to pay for.

There is no such thing as "safe." The only thing we can say is that we can always take more precautions.

Retailers are loath to get involved with this. They are afraid of lawsuits if they start establishing food safety criteria. They hate that their own standards restrict who they can buy from, so they really would prefer the FDA or an industry group establish standards and they, as retailers, will accept them as the food safety standard.

But even a tough FDA standard, by definition, is just a lowest common denominator standard. It is the foundation below which no one is allowed to go. So why in the world wouldn't many retailers want to exceed these minimal standards?

- Don't at least some retailers want to purchase greens grown on land totally fenced in and electrified with the fence going several feet underground? This would minimize the chances of a deer, a cow or other animal leaving anything dangerous in the field.

- On vulnerable items, shouldn't actual product be tested both when it comes into a processing facility and, again, before it leaves? Sure, if we can't speed up testing, a "hold till clear" policy might shave two days off shelf life. Aren't at least some retailers willing to trade a couple days shelf life for food safety?

- Surely some retailer wants a manure-free guarantee. What century are we in? Why run the risk of improper composting? After all, organic produce can be grown without manure.

- One would think that at least some retailers would want input on a whole bunch of other standards, such as what is an acceptable water standard. How frequently should it be tested? How about protecting the bags so that they are sanitized and then put under a kind of seal? Loads of other possibilities.

The key is this: All these things are possible and more; what holds suppliers back is not that they need an FDA regulation — it is that they need to see a willingness on the part of buyers to pay more to obtain a higher level of food safety and security. So far that is missing.

True leadership in an industry comes out when the chips are down and, so far, the retail community has been conspicuous by its absence from industry leadership on this vital issue. Retailers, properly considered, are the agents by which consumers channel their will in our system. If retailers don't speak up, if retailers don't assert the wants and needs of the

consumer, who will?

It is a mantra, often repeated in the produce industry, that food safety should never be used as a competitive advantage. The practical effect of such a position is that no one has an incentive to do more than the minimum required. Of course, there is no justification for name-calling and saying other people's produce is "unsafe," but there is not a thing wrong with a supermarket demanding exceptionally high standards and then telling the consumers that it has done so. Yet retailers don't seem willing to seize a leadership position on this issue.

Three people died in the spinach outbreak. With our current advanced testing technology, we still can expect to identify even more frequent outbreaks in the future.

A lot of growers who had spinach in the ground lost a fortune. There is a dark cloud over the valley.

But clouds lift, and it is good to remember that many of the advances in farming have come out of that same Salinas Valley when other situations looked grim before. The farmers in Salinas will find a way to take this situation, turn it to their advantage and make the Salinas Valley a food safety showcase for the world. But it sure would help if some retailers thought safety was worth paying up for.

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