

OPINION

America Shouldn't Scrimp on Food Safety

System already lacks adequate resources

BY AMANDA HITT

Americans are becoming too familiar with imported foodborne illnesses.

Remember the tainted dog food from China and those salmonella-laced hot peppers shipped from Mexico? Now a virulent strain of E. coli is racing across Europe, possibly heading toward our shores.

We're not ready for this new strain, if it comes to that. The government bulkhead required to keep it out is weak.

As the threat of the European outbreak looms, consumers may find it hard to believe that U.S. officials aren't inspecting much of anything, let alone testing vegetable imports for E. coli.

According to the Food and Drug Administration, approximately 15 to 20 percent of the

American diet is imported, including half our fruit and the vast majority of our fish — and this stream of foreign-sourced food is rapidly escalating.

But federal officials only inspect about 2 percent of imported food, and virtually none of the roughly 240,000 foreign food facilities that manufacture, process, pack, or

hold food for export to the U.S. A seemingly simple solution for consumers would be to avoid eating imported foods, but that's harder than you would think. Even if you wanted to, reading food labels is no sure way to discover a product's country of origin.

Processed foods often include imported as well as domestic ingredients, without any country-of-origin labeling requirement. Hence, most consumers don't know when they're consuming an imported food.

Furthermore, threats to food safety usually aren't random. Some countries lack the neces-

sary regulatory infrastructure to ensure proper facility upkeep. That was the case in 2007, when melamine, a Nitrogen-rich chemical usually used to make fertilizer and plastics, tainted vast quantities of dog food imported from China. Also there's threats of bioterrorism that constantly loom.

Luckily, as food globalization and the international outsourcing of goods and services become increasingly common, laws governing food imports can evolve.

Lawmakers clearly considered the growth of imported food in the recently passed Food Safety Modernization Act — a pillar of which was making our food safer. However, since that law's passage, Congress has placed a stranglehold on all food agency budgets.

In an unfortunate Faustian compromise, Congress has opted to save on immediate costs by underfunding food import safety, at the risk of costly and preventable foodborne illness.

The FDA is anticipating such

a tight budget that it's turning to the Walmart model to address this problem. Pending the budget to do so, the agency plans to hire hundreds of third-party certifiers to inspect overseas food facilities, including Bureau Veritas, a French company that currently advises Walmart on how to comply with U.S. safety standards.

Perhaps this particular relationship might be better left unfunded. The FDA shouldn't take any safety advice from an organization that sets its food safety standards for the purposes of competitive advantage rather than customer safety.

Let's not forget about the domestic budget cuts threatening meat and poultry safety. A reduced USDA budget means less money for inspectors. Some lawmakers say the solution would be to simply empower the industry to initiate its own "self-inspection" program. But consumer groups have harshly criticized its unproven model for reducing foodborne pathogens.

Federal budget cuts aren't the only worry. State governments pick up some of the slack for the Department of Agriculture and the FDA, often serving as the front line in identifying the source of foodborne illness.

The Minnesota Public Health Department, for example, cracked the case on two of the largest food recalls in history when it fingered peppers and peanuts as the culprits responsible for large-scale E. coli and Salmonella outbreaks.

Unfortunately, cuts in the budgets for state public health agencies are putting an even greater strain on a system that already lacks adequate resources to monitor food safety.

Politicians are jumping on the "fiscal responsibility" train by talking about major budget cuts. But gambling with the nation's food safety shouldn't even be on the table.

Amanda Hitt is the Food Integrity Campaign director for the Government Accountability Project.



No Solutions Offered from GOP Presidential Field

Debate was nothing more than Obama bashing

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

The recent Republican debate, billed as venue for would-be contenders to establish themselves in a crowded field as they kick off the 2012 Presidential race, were nothing more than an Obama bashing contest.

One would think the presidential wannabes would have preferred to have spent their time presenting their plans for lower-

ing the nation's high unemployment rates or proposing ways to fix our failing education system.

It seems, as least in these early days of the race, putting forth solutions is not the goal. Discrediting the President is.

Some of the comments made at the debate were so personal and inflammatory that you had to wonder if the Republican candidates have a personal issue with the President.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich wasted no time and almost immediately attacked President Obama, saying that America needs a "new presi-

dent to end the Obama Depression." And Former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum accused the President of "shackling the economy."

Perhaps these gentlemen have forgotten that the "Great Recession" began under the watch of George W. Bush.

President Obama has tried to work across party lines to put forth legislation that will create jobs and provide a safety net for struggling families. In many cases, he was hit with Republican opposition so strong that his original plans had to be modified beyond recognition.

It's only natural for a politician to want to go after their key opponent. But as voters, we do

expect that at some point the insults will stop and the real talk will begin. If the Republicans think Obama is doing a bad job, that's fine. But how will they do things differently...and better? We don't know because, unfortunately, they aren't saying.

If any of these candidates sincerely want to better America and not just improve their standing in the polls, they are going to have to come to the table with real solutions.

If they think that universal healthcare is a bad idea and want to repeal it, what are they going to replace it with? How are they going to ensure Americans get quality healthcare at a reasonable price? These are the

things we want answers to.

Minnesota Representative — and Tea Party favorite — Michelle Bachman was bold enough to say the President won't be re-elected. No one knows what the future holds but we do know this: Obama swept into office with his message of change and has worked hard to bring it to every corner of this country.

If Republican candidates can't tell us how they'd effect change and make our lives more secure, we'd all be better off if they stepped down.

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