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## Food for Thought

Opinions on Issues Impacting farming and the food supply.

### Food Safety: Glass Half-full or Half-empty?

- Center for Consumer Freedom - 5/13/2009

Last weekend the Sunday New York Times addressed a question that many Americans with misconceptions about the H1N1 flu virus are asking in the wake of recent food recalls: How safe is our food supply? The exact same article appeared in two different newspapers. The Times ran it under the headline "Outbreaks put worry on the table." But the Cleveland Plain Dealer headline was noticeably less anxiety-inducing: "Health experts say food supply is safer today than a decade ago, but recalls raise new concerns." Which was more accurate?

The article explains why technology has become a double-edged sword for measuring food safety. Though innovations have brought more effective ways of protecting Americans from contaminated food, technology has also enabled researchers to measure and document food-borne illnesses earlier and more accurately.

Public health experts cannot give a definitive answer, largely because the historical figures on food-borne illness are spotty. But most of them believe the nation's food supply is markedly safer now than it was 100 years ago, and probably safer than a decade ago...

Starting in 1996, the government started collecting better figures on these illnesses. Figures before that are incomplete. But Dr. Robert Tauxe, deputy director of food-borne diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], said there was no doubt the food supply is safer now than in the days before municipal sewer systems, refrigeration and milk pasteurization.

The paradox is that even as food has grown safer, contamination scares and recalls keep coming to light...

Part of the explanation, public health experts say, is that the technology for identifying multistate outbreaks has improved.

Decades ago, the chance of illness was probably higher, but foods were not recalled as often, simply because investigators could not implicate them in a given outbreak.

So how dangerous is eating these days? Based on what the CDC deputy director and other experts have said, the Plain Dealer hit the nail on the head: Though recent outbreaks are a clear indication that that our system isn't perfect, eating today is far less risky than it was even ten years ago.

But not everyone chooses to focus on the “progress” side of the food safety equation. There will always be some activist (or newspaper editor) who is dedicated to seeing the proverbial glass as half-empty.