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Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!

Industrial Agriculture Threatens Food Safety and Public Health

Today, most of the meat and dairy products sold in the U.S. come from factory farms; industrial-scale facilities where thousands of animals are crowded together in tight, often unsanitary conditions.

The negative environmental and economic effects of factory farms are well documented. These facilities produce overwhelming amounts of animal waste that is piled on land, poured into giant cesspools and often sprayed on fields. Cesspool leaks and run-off from farm fields can pollute nearby streams or groundwater.

The replacement of small family farms by large factory operations often drains the economic health from rural communities. Rather than buying feed and supplies from local businesses, factory farms usually do business with distant corporations that they are affiliated with.

Even if you live in a city hundreds of miles away from the nearest factory farm, you can still be affected, simply because you eat. We are all at risk, and must demand a food productions system that is safe.

Animal Feed – You are What You Eat….And What They Ate

Antibiotics

Factory farms typically mix low doses of antibiotics into animal food and water to promote growth and prevent disease caused by overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, 70% of all antibiotics used in the U.S. are fed to livestock. Livestock consumes 25 million pounds of antibiotics annually, more than 8 times the amount used to treat disease in humans. This creates a major public health issue that is growing. Bacteria exposed to continuous, low doses of antibiotics can become resistant and then spawn new bacteria with the antibiotic resistance. For example, almost all strains of staph infections in the U.S. are resistant to penicillin, and many are resistant to newer drugs as well.

E. Coli

Grass is the natural diet for cattle. However, cattle produced by factory farms are fed mostly corn and soybeans for the last few months of their lives. Grains increase their growth and make their meat more tender, but also causes human health risks. Grain-fed cattle have much higher levels of E-coli bacteria in their intestines, creating higher risks of contamination during slaughter. Vegetables, as well as meat, can be contaminated by e-coli from cattle if manure is used as fertilizer or if water used for irrigation or crop-cleaning contains animal waste. The 2006 case of E-coli contaminated spinach is one example.

Hormones

An estimated two-thirds of all U.S cattle receive growth hormones. Six different hormones are used – three are naturally occurring hormones and three are synthetic. Beef hormones were banned by the European Union in the 1980s and a 1999 report by the European Commission found that residues in meat from injected animals could affect the hormonal balance of humans, causing reproductive issues and breast, colon or prostate cancer. Recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) is a genetically engineered artificial growth hormone used to increase milk production in dairy cows from 8-17%. The FDA approved rBGH in 1993 based solely on an unpublished study by Monsanto, the manufacturer. Canada, Australia, Japan and the EU prohibit the use of rBGH.

Approximately 22% of all dairy cows in the U.S. are injected with rBGH, but 54% of large herds (500 or more cows) use it. Its use has increased udder infections by 25%, increasing the need for antibiotics and creating a vicious cycle. Additionally, milk from cows injected with rBGH has higher levels of another hormone, Insulin Growth Factor-1 (IGF-1). Elevated levels of IGF-1 in humans have been linked to colon and breast cancer.

Irradiation

Some food industry and government officials are touting irradiation – exposing food to high doses of radiation to kill bacteria – as the way to fend off future outbreaks of food-borne illness. This approach is misguided for many reasons. While the FDA approved irradiation in 1986 to kill insects on vegetables and to extend shelf-life, this approval was for radiation doses far too low to kill harmful bacteria like E-coli. Very limited research has been done on the safety and wholesomeness of irradiated vegetables but what exists suggests that overall quality declines when irradiation is used. Further, building an infrastructure of irradiation facilities to treat the billions of pounds of lettuce and spinach consumed in the U.S. would be extremely complicated and expensive. Instead of irradiation, vegetable growers and processors should improve flawed sanitation practices that give rise to problems in the first place.

What You Can Do to Improve Food Safety

- Make informed purchasing decisions. Refer to the Eat Well Guide to find sustainable producers and retailers. See www.eatwellguide.org
- Become a regular at the farmer's market. Talking with the person who produces your food gives you the opportunity to ask questions about how the food was produced.
- Support legislation to phase-out the routine use of antibiotics in livestock. The **Preserve Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act (PAMTA) (HR1549/ S619)** would end the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics, require new antibiotics pass tough standards before being used on livestock and will not restrict the use of antibiotics on an animal that is sick. **Rep. André Carson** is the only Indiana co-sponsor of this legislation. Contact your Congressional representatives and ask them to support PAMTA.
- Oppose legislation to expand the use of irradiation. The **Processed Food Safety Act (S 2819)** is the wrong approach to protecting consumers from contaminated food. Rather than focusing on preventing contamination, this bill emphasizes treatment after the fact with irradiation and chemicals. Tell Senators Bayh and Lugar to oppose this bill and work for a sustainable and preventive approach.

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