



Policy Update: Food Safety

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Recurring national outbreaks of food-borne illness and public health alerts due to microbial contamination of a variety of fresh and processed foods have steadily increased pressure on Congress and government agencies to “fix” the food system. This winter’s widespread outbreak of illness caused by grossly contaminated peanut butter produced by a large processing facility in Georgia, has proven to be the last straw: five separate food-safety-related bills have been introduced in Congress this year. Each proposes new food handling, processing and record-keeping requirements that would directly affect the practices of farmers, food processors and retailers – both large and small:

- HR 759, Rep. John Dingell, FDA Globalization Act of 2009: extends FDA’s authority on a wide range of food-related issues and mandates electronic product trace-back systems that would apply to processors and others
- HR 814, Rep. Diana DeGette, TRACE Act: requires trace-back systems for all livestock and meat products that could result in a mandatory National Animal Identification System.
- HR 875, Rep. Rosa DeLauro, Food Safety Modernization Act: establishes a new Food Safety Administration and requires all farms to adopt “good practice standards” and related compliance documentation. (Note: HR 875 has generated a great deal of grassroots concern, both warranted and unwarranted. The bill is being revised to address potential impacts on small farms and local markets.)
- HR 1332, Rep. Jim Costa, Safe FEAST Act of 2009: moves towards mandatory monitoring and testing of food production and processing practices for fresh vegetables and fruits
- S425, Sen. Sherrod Brown, Food Safety and Tracking Improvement Act: establishes a mandatory electronic records and traceability system for all meat and poultry products.

Though different -- and troublesome -- in many respects, these bills have one thing in common: a failure to recognize that food-safety related risks and problems associated with very large scale farms, processing and marketing operations may be quite different, in nature and degree, than those of smaller-scale operations and local markets. They fail to recognize the need for “scale appropriate” measures in achieving food safety goals that do not burden smaller farms, processors and markets with unnecessary, unworkable and expensive regulations.

The passage of new food safety legislation has emerged as a high priority and has moved ahead of health care and energy legislation on the agenda of the House Committee on

Energy and Commerce. Its Subcommittee on Health held its first hearing on March 11 to explore “key concepts that could be included in a model food safety bill.” The Committee may have a bill ready by late spring.

NOFA is working with a number of other farm, environment and consumer organizations to “inform” members of Congress, the Committee and the Administration that food safety policies and programs must avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. They must be guided by actual risk assessments for different products, marketing practices and scales of farms. Assumptions and extrapolations based on problems of the industrial food system are unsound and counterproductive. Incentives and training to support the development of flexible, farm-specific and effective food safety plans that meet the needs of farmers, local wholesale buyers and consumers must be included. And the important food-safety related aspects of organic production, inspection and certification practices need to be recognized.

Members of Congress have been listening -- and learning. In the weeks ahead, as the legislative debate and discussion continues, local farm and food organizations from around the country will stay engaged and working to ensure that new food safety legislation supports the continued development of local food systems. NOFA Vermont will be providing its members with regular updates and inviting them to get involved.

NOFA Vermont held a food safety policy workshop for farmers as part of its Winter Conference and is planning several on-farm workshops for our Summer Workshop Series. In cooperation with the NOFA Interstate Council and NOFA Massachusetts we are seeking federal funding to identify critical food safety research, as well as outreach and education strategies, that can meet the diverse needs of local producers and their markets.

More information can be found on NOFA Vermont’s webpage – www.nofavt.org.