

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Building a stronger food safety system

After nearly two years, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of the United States Department of Agriculture now has an Undersecretary in place. Dr. Elizabeth Hagen was confirmed by the Senate on September 16, 2010 to head the agency. A week later, she addressed the issue of modernizing the USDA's food safety efforts in a speech to the Consumer Federation of America and the Grocery Manufacturer's Association.

Hagen told the audience, "Calls for food safety reform have come from every angle—from members of Congress...to members of the media.... The consumer advocacy community and the industry we regulate are all asking the same question. That gives us a rare opportunity to build a stronger, national food safety system. To make real gains in protecting public health. It's an opportunity to ask tough questions and look for new or improved solutions."

She then organized her remarks around three themes—prevention, tools, and people. While the FSIS and the industry have made strides in improving the food safety system, given the major outbreaks in the past couple of years, the FSIS faces challenges including pathogens that are not addressed by current policies, traceback, humane handling of animals, prevention and public health, and improvements in the HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) system for food safety.

The tools that Hagen identified include improved data collection and analysis as well as improved support of inspectors, better relationships with other food safety agencies, and improved technological support of the inspection system.

"People," she said, "are why all this matters. That's why we're here. We're doing this work in food safety to serve real people, real families, to keep Americans the healthiest they can be." And it is people from consumer advocates, to FSIS employees who will need to work together to make the food system as safe as possible.

As we have said before, it is in the interest of all farmers that we have the best food safety system possible because when something goes wrong, farmers are the ones who are affected. A batch of spinach is found to be contaminated with E. coli O:157 H7, and hundreds of other spinach farmers find it difficult to move a perishable product. A story about contaminated hamburger hits the headlines and the demand for beef weakens.

It is tempting to want to take pot-shots at the

messenger—the media. It is natural to want to argue that everything has been blown out of proportion, but that won't bring the customers back.

Throughout our lifetimes, US farmers have taken pride in two things. We have provided the US and the world with an abundant supply of safe food. What we are learning today is that the public's food safety expectations keep increasing. That increase in expectations is not unlike what is happening in the rest of society—we expect safer cars and better health care.

And, farmers need to be out in front of the food safety bandwagon. Yes, that will require changes in the way we have always done things.

Over the last 50 years, the standards for milk handling by dairies have increased, and will likely continue to on that path.

We may have to vaccinate our animals, not only for diseases that harm the animals, we may need to vaccinate them for diseases that they tolerate but are deadly to human beings. If cattle operators are able to vaccinate their animals against E. coli, then the pathogen load going into the slaughter plant is lower. If chickens are vaccinated against Salmonella, then the chance of a serious outbreak is greatly reduced.

No doubt changes will be put into place all along the meat and food supply chain. Many of those changes are long overdue and affect operations and processes that occur beyond the farm gate. But farm producers will not be exempt. As wrought with uncertainty and dread as such a prospect may be, it likely reflects the reality of a future that needs to be accepted and accommodated.

Farmers will need to be less tolerant of others in their industry who try to cut corners in order to save a buck, because when something goes wrong all are affected.

We have told the public that we provide them with the safest food supply in the world. We are now at a point in time where, as the result of a series of serious food-borne illness outbreaks, we have to prove that to a public that has become skeptical.

Daryll E. Ray holds the Blasingame Chair of Excellence in Agricultural Policy, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee, and is the Director of UT's Agricultural Policy Analysis Center (APAC). Harwood D. Schaffer is a Research Assistant Professor at APAC. (865) 974-7407; Fax: (865) 974-7298; dray@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>.

Originally published in *MidAmerica Farmer Grower*, Vol. 30, No. 40, September 30, 2010
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