

Growing Dependence on Foreign Food Bodes Poorly For U.S. Security

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Everyone is justifiably up in arms over the recent contamination of wheat gluten used in pet food that killed thousands of animals. Last week, federal agencies revealed that chickens and pigs had been given similarly tainted feed, and that many of the affected chickens had entered the nation's food chain. Those two events graphically demonstrate just how vulnerable our imported food supply is. They underscore how vulnerable the American public is, to lax food safety standards in other countries, or acts of food-based terrorism.

We all know that we import huge amounts of food. We've also now learned that the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) only inspects about one percent of that imported food. The call has now gone out to radically increase the FDA's inspection capabilities. Recently Tommy Thompson (President Bush's former Secretary of Health and Human Services) advocated for a doubling of the FDA's resources.

Mr. Thompson knows what he's talking about. This is the same man who, as he was leaving the Bush Administration, bluntly said, "I cannot understand why the terrorists have not attacked our food supply, because it is so easy to do." Further, Thompson said at the time that he worries "every single night" about threats to the American food supply.

However, while Mr. Thompson's proposal is laudable and would represent an improvement, in reality it means the FDA would be able to inspect a whopping two percent of the imported food supply, thus leaving 98% un-inspected.

Remarkably absent from the newly-ignited dialogue about food safety is a recognition of the importance of a domestic food supply. Politicians from both parties now routinely espouse ending our reliance of foreign energy sources, but nobody is talking about food independence. The only solutions the talking heads want to discuss are more inspections by the FDA. Nobody should be very comfortable with an expanded inspection process that gives a foreign terrorist a 98% chance of succeeding in poisoning a commodity that finds its way into our food supply chain.

Is anyone even interested in talking about the importance of supporting and protecting domestic food producers? The ones who are talking the loudest are critics of irrigated agriculture, who we can expect to try to deflect this argument by pointing to recent food safety problems with produce and meat that have originated on the domestic front.

Very definitely, those are real issues that have to be addressed. However, we have a much better chance of solving those problems associated with domestic food supplies. Not so with un-inspected foreign food.

Federal policies affecting irrigation water supplies and domestic agriculture are directly linked to food safety, and should be scrutinized in the context of protecting the nation's food chain.

Having a broad, reliable and safe domestic food supply is just as important as having an army to protect our national interests. The post 9/11 world of terrorist threats makes the stability of domestic food supply even more pressing.

The United States and the rest of the world have always relied upon our farmers and ranchers to feed them. Now it appears that our political leaders have accepted the philosophy that other countries will take over this role.

So, as you ponder which countries we should hand this role over to, you might want to ask a farmer or rancher to join you for dinner. Before too long, you may not again have the chance.

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