Panera Bread Celebrates Wasting Food This Fourth of July

By Alex Berezow, PhD — July 1, 2017

The thoroughly debunked myth that the world is overpopulated is still pervasive. A corollary to that myth is the belief that, as the population continues growing, we will not be able to provide enough food for everybody. In fact, the exact opposite is the case.

In wealthy parts of the world, we produce too much food, in part because we reject ugly food and in part due to government policies that have distorted the market. As a result, we end up throwing away much of it. The numbers vary, with The Guardian [2] reporting that the U.S. wastes about half of its food, while The Economist [3] argues the world squanders 1/3 of it.

Regardless of the exact number, the lesson is clear: The trouble with our food supply is not production but distribution. How can we decrease the amount of food waste and get food to the people who truly need it?

One way is through preservatives. These are safe chemical additives, be they natural or artificial, that serve several useful purposes beyond extending shelf-life. For instance, they prevent food from rotting and reduce the likelihood of foodborne illness. According to the FDA [4], preservatives and other additives are:

"...strictly studied, regulated and monitored. Federal regulations require evidence that each substance is safe at its intended level of use before it may be added to foods. Furthermore, all additives are subject to ongoing safety review as scientific..."
understanding and methods of testing continue to improve. Consumers should feel safe about the foods they eat."

In a nutshell, preservatives help keep our food supply safe. Apparently, Panera Bread is unaware of this. In a bizarre tweet, the company bragged about blowing up artificial preservatives:

Of course, the key word here is "artificial." Panera Bread is relying on the naturalistic fallacy ("Natural things are good, and unnatural things are bad.") to mislead their customers into believing that their food is safer and healthier. It's the exact same sort of nonsense that Whole Foods uses to market its food [5].

If Panera Bread wants to be truly transparent instead of relying on marketing gimmicks, it should answer the following questions:

1) What sort of preservatives are you using in your food?
2) If you aren't using any preservatives, then are you putting your customers at risk of foodborne illness?

3) Has eliminating artificial preservatives caused your company to increase the amount of food it wastes?

Starving people in Africa and Asia might be particularly interested in learning the answer to the last question.