Is Bigger Plus Radiation Best for Food Production?

By ACSH Staff — February 6, 2008

A recent article in *USA Today* [1] describes how big business can have an impact on food safety. The agricultural industry is increasingly dominated by a handful of high-volume producers, which means no contamination incident is small in size or scope. Add to this the problem of an outdated food-surveillance system that can't really police the nation's entire food supply and often prioritizes risks poorly.

So how does big business impact our food system? Is it a good thing to have a few high-volume producers? With the big E.coli outbreak this summer from meat (three batches of hamburger were found contaminated and were responsible for making at least forty people sick), we are reminded that big business is still vulnerable when it comes to microbes. An article posted by the *New York Times* about Topps [2] stated that the Federal investigators said they had recently learned that the company failed to require adequate testing on the raw beef it bought from its domestic suppliers, and it sometimes mixed tested and untested meat in its grinding machines.

There are serious consequences for cutting corners like this, and for neglecting food safety and microbiological testing, for both the consumer and producer. Topps Meat Company -- previously one of the country's largest manufacturers of frozen hamburgers -- may have learned the hard way, when it went out of business in the fall of 2007, after recalling more than 21.7 million pounds of ground beef. Of course, consumers also paid the price for the company's negligence, in the form of food-borne illness.

The numerous outbreaks we have seen, such as spinach contaminated with E.coli in 2006 and hamburger in 2007, may also be the results of an FDA that can't keep up with enforcement. According to the *New York Times*, in 1973, the FDA undertook 34,919 food inspections; in 2006, that number had dropped to 7,783.

Does this mean we should be fearful of hamburger meat or overcook our vegetables to death? The risks of microbes (bacteria, viruses, etc.) being in your food has always been there. The types of microbe outbreaks, the quantity, and the carrier can change from year to year. Smaller food companies have a slight advantage over large companies when it comes to microbes, because their smaller volume means less risk of contamination. However, the larger food companies have the money to do adequate microbiological testing and have food safety systems in place. And when there is a problem detected, they are equipped to do a massive recall.

An extra safeguard that is also available to food companies, irradiation, is under-utilized. Since 2000, irradiated ground beef has been available in many supermarkets in the U.S. It offers major advantages over other treatments, providing a necessary microbiological killing step for fresh, frozen, and ready-to-eat foods.

Most of us do not have the luxury of buying fruits and vegetables from local vendors, and the small butcher shop has been replaced by superstores. So, we are forced to rely on food companies being responsible and self-policing, and on the government to do the necessary enforcing. It's in the food companies' own best interests to provide safe foods, and the government's responsibility to look out for its people's health.

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See ACSH's booklet on *Irradiated Foods* [5].

Irradiated foods 2007 Cover

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