



FDA Intervention Not Needed for Produce Safety

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Oct 27, 2008 - It's not at all uncommon for American industries to tell the government that everyone — corporations and consumers alike — will be better off if their trade is subject to fewer regulations and less direct government intervention. The market introduces efficiencies that the government can't produce, and competition ultimately weeds out bad actors that permit low standards or dishonest practices. Of course, it's also not at all uncommon, either, for a lack of oversight and regulation to result in cut corners and corporate abuses that hurt consumers and violate the public trust.

So, when an issue as important as the limitation of future foodborne illness outbreaks is at stake, it's understandable that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is currently trying to decide whether the U.S. produce industry can improve traceability standards on its own, or whether new federal regulations might be required to ensure that the agency can trace back and isolate the source of contamination as quickly as possible when a produce-related outbreak sickens a large number of U.S. consumers.

In this case, the FDA should rest easy: The U.S. produce industry is already well on its way toward developing a standardized electronic traceability system that will significantly improve recall response times and narrow the impact of future outbreaks.

This month, 34 companies — including retailers, growers, packers and foodservice companies — endorsed a plan developed by the Produce Traceability Initiative, a program administered by the Produce Marketing Association, the United Fresh Produce Association and the Canadian Produce Marketing Association. These associations have been studying this issue for years, in consultation with member companies throughout the supply chain. With this announcement, the industry has agreed to an electronic traceability system with which all companies are expected to be fully compliant by 2012 — a challenging, but realistic time frame.

Although the plan is industry-sponsored and voluntary, surely even the most stubborn holdouts will recognize that retail participants — including Wal-Mart, Kroger, Safeway and Supervalu — will ultimately demand compliance from all of their supplier partners.

Foodborne illness outbreaks and product recalls are profoundly damaging to the produce industry. Initial losses from the E. coli outbreak of 2006 caused by contaminated spinach were estimated at \$75 million to \$100 million, and this summer's Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak cost growers about \$100 million.

It is clearly in the produce industry's collective best interest to limit the scope and duration of future outbreaks by identifying the source of the problem as quickly as possible, and with the Produce Traceability Initiative, the industry has developed a comprehensive solution on its own. In its goal of protecting consumers, the FDA can be most effective here by acting as a partner that vets and enhances the new capabilities that electronic traceability will offer, rather than pushing the industry in a new direction.

To view the original press release/article, visit <http://www.foodhaccp.com/1news/102708g.html>