Point: Small Doesn’t Mean Safe

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Last week, the Senate passed its version of food safety legislation [1], giving the Food and Drug Administration more power to prevent potentially harmful foods from hitting the shelves. If passed by the House, the bill would give the FDA the power to order mandatory recalls, establish stricter standards for imported foods and require food processors to create food safety plans.

All these regulations would provide the industry with a huge opportunity to improve its reputation with consumers by ensuring a safe food supply, but there is one crucial amendment to the legislation that could threaten its effectiveness. The Tester-Hagan amendment would exempt smaller operations with less than $500,000 a year in sales who sell the majority of their products locally. The amendment was a latecomer to the bill, and many senators viewed it as the only way to ensure the bill passed after several small food and grassroots organizations protested, arguing that costly FDA compliance rules were unnecessary for small producers and could bankrupt some businesses.

In theory, this might seem like a good idea; after all, submitting a farmer who only sells produce at the local market to FDA inspections and compliance rules may seem cumbersome and a little extreme. But in reality, the amendment could be detrimental to the bill’s intent to provide a safer food supply.

The local food movement seems to be gaining momentum daily, fueled by the belief that local, organically produced food is safer than products from larger companies. Large-scale recalls continue to shine a spotlight on the problems of “big food,” leading even more consumers to jump on the local food bandwagon. For instance, after the recent salmonella outbreak in eggs [2], many consumers switched to pricier organic, locally grown eggs in hopes of avoiding harmful bacteria.

But smaller food producers are by no means exempt from food safety issues. Numerous recalls each year are linked to small producers. In late October, the FDA shut down the Estrella Family Creamery [3], a small cheese producer based in Washington state, after its cheeses repeatedly tested positive for Listeria and the company refused to voluntarily recall its products. Such recalls have become prevalent, especially in the artisanal cheese industry, where many products are produced with unpasteurized milk [4]. At least nine artisanal cheese makers have experienced recalls this year, including Bravo Farms [5], whose E. coli-tainted cheese sickened 37 people and led to a lawsuit [6].

The simple fact is that small doesn't mean safe. As long as producers of any size are exempt from extensive safety testing, consumers will continue to get sick. Larger outbreaks may draw more attention, but shoppers will still run an increased risk of foodborne illness should the Tester amendment remain in place.

If the FDA is to do its job properly, it must be able to inspect the safety of food produced by both large and small businesses. Otherwise, the safety of the U.S. food supply will not reach its full potential, and public confidence in the industry will continue to suffer.

There is no doubt that America's food safety system is in drastic need of an overhaul, and a bill exempting small producers is better than no bill at all. However, all parties involved must seriously consider the consequences of such an exemption.

What do you think? Should smaller producers be exempt from the food safety legislation? Let me know at lindsey.coblentz@advantagemedia.com *[7].*

For another view on the topic, check out Krystal Gabert's piece, Weighing The Threats To A Safe Food Supply ***[8]***.

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