

# Rapid Response Missing in New Food Safety Law

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“A leaky roof sending bird droppings — and salmonella — into peanut products at the infamous Peanut Corp. of America. E. coli contaminating fields of spinach. And unspeakably filthy conditions at the DeCoster farm that produced Salmonella-tainted eggs that sickened 1,800 people.”

That’s how Dr. Michael Jacobsen, head of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, summed up the food safety events of 2010 in a recent blog post on [EatingWell](#) [1].

Theatrics aside, this may very well sum up current consumer attitudes toward the food industry. And who can blame them? Not a week goes by that a food safety alert or recall notice isn’t issued in the U.S.

The human costs alone are staggering. The CDC estimates that more than 5,000 die every year from foodborne illnesses. And, according to a Reuters report, 48 million Americans are sickened every year from eating contaminated food.

The 2010 egg recall alone involved more than half a billion eggs and was the largest outbreak of salmonella enteritidis since records have been kept in the 1970s. As the story developed, details quickly spread across blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other social media channels — a reminder of how rapidly news travels today.

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Greater awareness and more efficient communications channels can help save lives, but they can't do much about the fundamentals of the food supply chain. Globalization and industry consolidation have added a level of complexity to the food safety problem that requires an entirely new set of sophisticated prevention and response measures. From growers to manufacturers of ingredients, intermediaries and packaging food processors — including storage and delivery by warehouses and transporters — each link in the supply chain actively contributes to the ultimate delivery and consumption of food products around the world.

U.S. food imports have also grown at a much faster rate over the last decade, and some of the fastest-growing imports are coming from middle-income and developing countries such as Mexico, Chile, China and India. In many cases, these countries simply don't have the extensive food safety standards and practices found in more developed nations, which explains why the share of food-safety violations from developing countries grew from 12 percent in 1998 to 18 percent in 2004.

Greater regulatory oversight is part of the answer. And I believe that the recently passed Food Safety Modernization Act is a big step in the right direction. This new law, among other things, will help improve and increase the frequency of food inspections. It will also update food safety standards and provide the FDA with mandatory recall authority.

The government is clearly placing much greater emphasis on prevention, accountability and responsibility at each step of the food supply chain. And even though the bill wasn't without controversy, pressure from consumers had reached a tipping point. Congress *had* to act.

However, even though these new standards will improve overall food safety at some level, they're not enough to effectively manage the risks inherent in the food supply chain. Why? Because they fail to address the need for faster and more effective responses to food safety outbreaks.

More inspections are a good start. So is greater accountability and tighter oversight on imported foods. But consumers would still be at risk if FDA and USDA inspectors couldn't obtain timely and critical information from food companies in the event of an outbreak.

Isolating a problem and tracing affected products quickly requires immediate access to accurate lot-specific information. But for food manufacturers that have multiple steps in their production processes — and a manual system to track it all — finding receipts, purchase orders, bills of lading and other paperwork becomes a daunting process, making it nearly impossible to produce the necessary information within the four-hour window the FDA mandates.

Moreover, manual record-keeping methods are notoriously error prone. It's very easy to transpose a number or to miss something altogether. For instance, a company receives lot number 123 but someone records it as 132. In the event of a recall, this simple error would make it difficult to trace contaminated product in the

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supply chain.

To address this complex challenge, leading food manufacturers are adopting enterprise software to automate and integrate traceability across the multiple steps in their supply chains. Lot-tracing capabilities enable the manufacturer to trace a suspect or a contaminated lot from finished good back to raw ingredient, from raw ingredient to finished good or from mid-production backward or forward — all within just minutes. In the event of a safety alert, this capability can help prevent death and illness.

But the issue goes beyond regulatory compliance. Food manufacturers are also seeing increased demand for brand protection measures from their larger customers in retail and distribution. Many of these companies have instituted food safety audits and mock recalls that require rapid access to accurate summary product lot information with detailed supporting results.

For a food manufacturer, the cost of a failed mock recall can be catastrophic. And, in the case of a safety recall, not having lot-specific information will often force the manufacturer to expand the size of the recall due to the inability to accurately identify the affected lots.

Adopting tracking and tracing technology is no longer a luxury. In an environment of tougher regulations, greater risks and increased consumer awareness, prevention measures must be supplemented with rapid-response capabilities. The stakes are simply too high to sit on the sidelines.

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