



## Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

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The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy promotes resilient family farms, rural communities and ecosystems around the world through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy.

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# Fixing Our Broken Food System

By Jim Harkness

The recent discovery of an industrial chemical in animal feed and pet food imported from China has added to the mounting criticism of U.S. food safety agencies. But this case represents much more than simply governmental incompetence. It exposes the inherent weaknesses of an industrial global food system designed to benefit multinational agribusiness companies at the expense of public health.

Last year, the U.S. imported about \$10 billion more in food, feed and beverages than it exported. Imports came from 175 different countries and represented a 60 percent jump over the last decade. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspectors are simply overwhelmed. They were able to only physically examine 1.3 percent of food imports last year, about three-quarters of the already minute portion examined in 2003.

Our food system's increasing dependence on imports is no accident. Import dependency is a defining characteristic of an industrial food model driven by U.S. farm and trade policies over the last half century on behalf of agribusiness. U.S. farm policy has encouraged the mass production of only a few cheap crops largely used as food ingredients, animal feed and exports. U.S. trade policy has aggressively pushed for the removal of trade barriers paving the way for the global food trade.

Missing from this industrial model is a national priority to produce healthy food to feed Americans. For example, most rural Midwest supermarkets, surrounded by farms, import nearly all their food from elsewhere in the country and around the world.

We have built a system of production and trade that treats food the same as computer parts. Cracks in this system manifest themselves in different ways, including the loss of family farms in the U.S. and worldwide, declining soil and water quality, and a rise in food-related health problems including obesity. But food safety dangers get most of the headlines, because the cracks can be quickly fatal.

The tainted animal feed case is a stark example of the vulnerabilities of a global industrial food system. Feed contamination in China has found its way to the U.S. food supply through hogs in at least six states and at least 2.5 million chick-

ens.

Within the U.S., food contamination incidents on one farm or processing plant have hit large parts of the country. E. coli tainted spinach from a California farm affected people coast to coast, killing three and sickening nearly 200. Salmonella contaminated peanut butter from a Georgia ConAgra plant sickened at least 329 people in 41 states.

These breakdowns were accidental, but what about intentional contamination of food? As Tommy Thompson, former director of the Department of Health and Human Services, said in 2004, “I cannot understand why the terrorists have not attacked our food supply because it is so easy to do.”

In the near term, we must boost the number of food safety inspectors, employ cutting edge inspection technology, and strengthen oversight to rely less on industry self-regulation. It’s alarming that between 2003 and 2006, FDA food safety inspections overall actually dropped by 47 percent.

But systemic changes in our food system are just as badly needed. A more decentralized food system that supports local production and consumption would greatly limit the impact of broad-scale food contamination. Quite simply, we should set policy priorities to produce more of our own food, both at the national and regional level.

Consumers already strongly endorse this approach. Locally-grown can be found on more and more store shelves. The number of farmers’ markets around the country has skyrocketed. And many mainstream supermarkets are taking steps on their own to give consumers more information about where their food comes from.

In the 2002 Farm Bill, Congress tacitly acknowledged this consumer interest by requiring all fruits, vegetables, meat and fish to be labeled with their country of origin. But food companies and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have successfully delayed implementation of such labeling for all but fish products.

Congress is writing a new Farm Bill. It’s an opportunity to accelerate the transition toward a more local-based food system by funding greater crop diversification, incentives for local food purchasing in schools and other government institutions, and full implementation of country of origin labeling in 2008. It’s time to put the public’s interest ahead of agribusiness in setting our nation’s food policy.■

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