

How serious are we about food safety?

By IATP

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President Obama's [recent nomination of Dr. Elisabeth Hagen](#) for the post of USDA Undersecretary for Food Safety has IATP board member and former USDA official Rod Leonard scratching his head in a new commentary entitled "[The Volcker Rule on food safety](#)" published this week. Beyond questions about Hagen's experience and largely unknown status in academia, Leonard makes the point that perhaps leaving the post vacant for the last year is more telling: How high does the safety of our food rank on the current administrations priorities? Not high, according to Leonard's analysis, especially compared to the general public where [regular news of food-borne illness outbreaks](#) keep people on their toes. So what's wrong?

Leonard blames a long-standing and continually reinforced hands-off policy that limits food safety inspectors' recourse to filing paperwork should they find a breach, and a policy process that he compares to "a modern-day version of Alice in Wonderland's Mad Hatter tea party," in which "all the Washington players on food safety sit at the policy table possessed by mutual suspicions, and agreed in a mutual contempt for people who inspect food." In other words, while food safety slowly deteriorates, policymakers in Washington continue to tie the hands of those actually safeguarding our food.

"This," he says, "is a classic example of program mismanagement: allocating time to paperwork and record keeping that would be better deployed in keeping the food system free of contaminated food." Reforming this system has proved a challenge but Leonard believes that the president holds the key, insisting that "[Obama] has the statutory authority to adopt an inspection system to safeguard the American food supply, and the power to begin restoring public confidence in food safety policy."

See the full text of Rod Leonard's new commentary [here](#)