



Promise and Peril in Food Safety Regulation

By Brian Snyder, Executive Director

The period from late winter into early spring on any farm is a time of critical importance for both the success of the farm and attitude of the farmer. I personally have been in many different situations in my life that help to prove this point, whether it be tapping maple trees for sap, birthing new lambs or piglets, frost-seeding pastures or ordering seeds and starts for summer produce.

But all such activities are fraught with both possibility and peril. I've been reminded this year that nothing jerks around the attitude of a farmer — even a hobby farmer like me — more than lambing on a late winter's night, with temperatures hovering in the single digits. There have been times when only an hour separated "We're selling all these damn sheep!" from "This is the beginning of a whole new flock!"...not necessarily occurring in that order.

So when you are out in the barn at night, with hands chapped from frozen amniotic fluid, you have plenty of time to think back on the past, and to allow the future to come crashing down on your own little self-pitying party. You also have an "opportunity" to consider the current state of the world and where things might be headed, particularly with respect to food and farming systems in general.

The metaphor is difficult to escape.

We are in the late winter of our industrial food system, and spring seems to be just around the corner, but the path is quite perilous. Attitudes are fluctuating and spilling out all over the place, and if we think about policy objectives or legislative initiatives as the offspring we have wrought, there is tremendous consternation about which ones should be put out of their misery, and which saved at all costs.

Let's face it. Some of the biggest challenges we now face have been of our own doing. You cannot spend years — decades even — talking about how our food systems are broken and the bulk of farms headed down the wrong path, without being handed some "solutions" that will radically change the way we also operate our farms and businesses.

This is particularly true when considering the proposed National Animal Identification System (NAIS), with all its good intentions and potentially unintended consequences. I mean, we fought for Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) and told consumers to "Find out where your food comes from!" So now it rings a little hollow if we say "Oh, we didn't mean that OUR animals should be identified!"

The same is true of food processing standards in general. We will want FDA and USDA, and/or whatever new agency they come up with to clamp down on mainstream processors of all kinds, but will also suggest that such agencies stay clear of the processing facilities closer to home.

Now, before anyone goes running to do a new blog entry on what Snyder thinks about all this, I want to make clear that I believe very strongly that one-size-fits-all regulations for food safety would be ineffective and ultimately doomed to failure. I am also a believer that most, if not all direct, on-farm sales between a farmer and a consumer should be exempt from all but the most general government scrutiny.

Even in terms of trying to implement such exemptions, I realize that we have again created much challenge for ourselves, in this case by greatly expanding the definition of what "direct sales" can mean. Admittedly, it's hard to argue that the government should have any role at all when an individual consumer arrives

at a farm and asks a single farmer to provide a fresh tomato or bottle of raw milk for a fair, mutually agreed upon price.

But when you add considerations for supplying buying clubs, where one consumer picks up and delivers to many homes, farmers' markets that are sometimes far from the farm, large subscription farms that distribute through paid staff in different geographical locations, farmer and retail cooperatives that aggregate product, in-home catering businesses and so on, I'm sure ten average people would draw the regulatory lines in ten different places.

On the other hand, we can probably all agree that any food item that arrives in the marketplace as a faceless commodity to be processed and distributed at the will of a corporate buyer, that also hides behind various fancy brand names and anonymous handling strategies for export to God-knows-where, should be identified and scrutinized for all its worth by those in government charged with keeping our food "safe."

The promise for us contained in any system of food safety regulation is that the more consumers know about where their food is from and how it is produced, the more our farmers, the land on which they farm and communities in which they live will benefit — you could almost say PASA is founded on that idea. But we cannot neatly and conveniently say "Here is where the information stops." We can only remain alertly and patiently engaged in the process of helping to bring this new food system for which we have worked so hard into existence.

All of which puts us all right back in that cold barn, with our hands aching and chapped, awaiting with great anticipation what the springtime will bring.

To use another metaphor that comes to mind this time of year, if we take our eyes off this ball, we will surely miss it altogether. But if we all remain alert — and I do mean "all" of us, including all the different perspectives contained within our community — and patiently wait for the right pitch, an opportunity to connect that takes us right around the bases and back to home could very well be the result. ■

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