

Reaction To The New York Times E. coli Story



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The Sunday, October 4, 2009 issue of the New York Times featured a story that gave dramatic visibility to the issue of food safety in the beef industry. The article, E. Coli Path Shows Flaws in Beef Inspection," told the story of a 22 year old woman who was left paralyzed because she ate a "hamburger that her mother had grilled for their Sunday dinner in early fall 2007" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/04/health/04meat.html>). Cargill "recalled 844,812 pounds of ground beef on October 6, 2007, after an estimated 940 people were sickened."

The reaction to the article was immediate with responses from the defenders of the meatpacking industry, to food safety experts, to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), to members of Congress. It even led to an article in the economist (United Kingdom) that said, "America's dirty secret is that it is one of the most dangerous places in the developed world to eat" (http://www.economist.com/sciencetechnology/displaystory.cfm?story_id=14627082).

While the New York Times article achieved good readership, it is not the first time that the issue of the safety of the beef inspection has been raised. Leaving Sinclair Lewis and his book *The Jungle* aside, in recent times four people have led the public charge for changes.

They are John Munsell, a former local packinghouse owner in Montana, who has been writing and speaking about this for many years; Bill Marler, a Seattle-based personal injury lawyer who has specialized in illnesses caused by food borne pathogens; James Marsden, Regent's Distinguished Professor of Food Safety and Security at Kansas State University; and Richard Raymond, former undersecretary for food safety at the USDA.

In addition there have been a number of people working within the meat inspection system who have unsuccessfully tried to bring about a change in the system.

We too have been alerting our readers to the imbalance of power between those who oversee meat safety and meat slaughtering houses and problems caused by that imbalance.

This past summer we wrote an eight-column series on problems with the food safety inspection system, especially as it relates to E. coli O157:H7. We identified a number of problems, many of which were mentioned in the New York Times article.

Problems included: the decision by USDA that E. coli was not to be treated as an adulterant on whole muscle cuts, despite the well-known fact that trim from these cuts ends up in ground beef; rules that have allowed packing plants that have positive contamination test reports to not report them to the USDA; the resistance of the packing plants and the USDA to allow trace-back of meat contamination to the source plant; and the refusal of packing plants to ship beef to downline plants that test all incoming beef for contamination.

What the New York Times article by Michael Moss did, was give the story a face. It was written in a way that captured the public attention. Suddenly food safety was no longer an abstract idea, it was a problem that could happen by the simple act of a mother grilling a hamburger for her daughter – it could happen to any one of us. In news parlance, the story had legs.

The quote that caught the most attention was a statement by "Dr. Kenneth Petersen, an assistant administrator with the department's Food Safety and Inspection Service, [who] said that the department could mandate testing, but that it needed to consider the impact on companies as well as consumers. "I have to look at the entire industry, not just what is best for public health," Dr. Petersen said."

While what Peterson said was not politically wise – it may have been a slip of the tongue – it reflects the internal conflict within the Food Safety Inspection Service at the USDA between meeting the needs of the packing industry and pressing for stronger food safety measures in the preparation of beef and beef products.

In response, Ag Secretary Vilsack said, "No priority is greater to me than food safety and I am firmly committed to taking steps necessary to reduce the incidence of food-borne illnesses. We will continue to make improvements to reduce the presence of E. coli O157:H7.

Chuck Jolley, a free lance writer who covers a wide range of ag industry topics for *Cattlenetwork.com* and *Agnetwork.com*, wrote, "the New York Times savaged the ground beef business with a front page bombshell of a story powered by some truths, a few dozen half truths, and a laundry list of misconceptions." Despite requests, Jolley has not identified which statements in the Times article that he believes are half-truths or misconceptions.

George Pucha writing on Richard Raymond's blog wrote, "the article and the responses constitute a resounding 'YES!' to the question of whether Michael Moss' article was 'fair.' I found the Moss article well researched, balanced, and accurate, I found the responses of industry and the regulators pretty disturbing but with a ring of truth about them!

"How many times must we read about somebody like Stephanie Smith before we declare that this can go no longer? Michael Moss has done both the industry and the USDA a great service."

From our perspective, *Cow-Calf Weekly* writer, Troy Marshall hit the nail on the head when he wrote, "It doesn't matter if the issue is food safety or animal welfare – as an industry we must demonstrate that we have declared an all-out war to eliminate any problems regardless of how rare they are." With that he reminds the industry that the customer is king.

Everyone from the cow calf operator to the feedlot manager has a stake in the solution to the intermittent problem of E. coli appearing in beef products. What happens after livestock leaves your yard eventually can, and likely will, affect the demand for your products and the profitability of your livestock operation.

To us the meat-safety ball was fumbled by Congress and the USDA, and by those livestock producer organizations that stood idly by. △

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