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Meat roulette

As the latest recall shows, food safety has taken a back seat to industry profits.

By Christopher D. Cook

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Nauseating as it was, last week's record-setting beef recall and the apparent feeding of meat from crippled "downer" cattle to our nation's children and others should come as little surprise. Although egregious to the point of obscenity, this latest meat scandal fits a pattern of regulatory anemia -- the byproduct of a decades-long bipartisan assault on "big government" -- that has opened the floodgates to all sorts of contamination shenanigans. The deregulated chickens, cows and pigs have come home to roost.

Prompted by an undercover film from the Humane Society of the United States that shows workers kicking and shocking downer cows -- cattle too sick to walk to their own slaughter -- the Chino, Calif.-based [Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Co.](#) recalled 143 million pounds of raw and frozen beef. (Stunningly, the government still lacks the legal authority to *require* food recalls -- it can only recommend them).

Coming on the heels of 21 beef recalls in 2007, this latest meat fiasco was followed by predictable and inadequate responses by apologists and critics alike. U.S. Department of Agriculture officials -- who, disturbingly, are charged with both promoting *and* monitoring our food supply -- trotted out the standard "don't worry, eat happy" line, even as they urged a recall. This signaled that our perilous game of meat roulette -- a \$70-billion-a-year business with phenomenal clout in Washington -- would go largely unchallenged. Wayne Pacelle, president and chief executive of the Humane Society, criticized "the inadequacies of the inspection system. How can so many downers have been mistreated day after day within a USDA oversight system that was present at the plant? We need more boots on the ground at the plants." Some in Congress are calling for a fuller investigation into regulatory lapses.

Clearly, more boots on the ground are vital. The USDA's inspection squad has been trimmed by both political parties since the 1970s, plummeting to about 7,800 from 12,000 in 1978. Unannounced inspections have diminished to roughly 15,000 annually from more than 22,000. But merely beefing up regulatory staffing is like affixing a Band-Aid for a hemorrhage. The U.S. food safety crisis -- in which, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 76 million people get sick each year, of whom 325,000 are hospitalized and more than 5,000 die -- has roots of a more systemic nature.

Despite some recent declines in food-borne illnesses, the longer-term trend has seen soaring rates of salmonella, E. coli and other bacterial contamination since the 1970s (rising from under 20,000 reported salmonella poisonings in 1967 to more than 40,000 a year by the mid-1990s). Meat contamination has proliferated over the past 30 years along with the rise of industrialized feedlots and lightning-fast processing plants run by ever-fewer, ever-larger corporations.

The Hallmark recall must be viewed within the context of meat industry consolidation, which has seen four corporations control 83% of the nation's beef production, according to the USDA. As the business has consolidated over 20 years, its clout in Washington has grown: witness the meat lobby's continued successful opposition to universal testing for mad cow disease, its ability to coax regulators to speed up processing lines, and its effectiveness in reducing both the role and number of inspectors.

Both political parties have contaminated meat on their hands. Since rules set forth by the Reagan administration, line speeds for meat and poultry processing have been increased (from 78 chickens a

minute to a dizzying 91 birds), threatening the safety of workers and consumers alike. In 1996, the Clinton administration struck a deal with the meat industry: a system that enhanced scientific guidelines for meat inspection while radically diminishing the presence of government inspectors on the production line. In affidavits, inspectors who cite problems have frequently reported being harassed and intimidated into silence by meat industry managers, and routinely relegated to evaluating company paperwork rather than monitoring the line.

Ultimately, what needs fixing goes far beyond recalling 143 million pounds of meat. We need to greatly expand the number and the *role* of food-safety inspectors; erect a stronger firewall between inspection and promotion, so the agency that sets line speeds and promotes productivity is not also charged with evaluating food safety; give the government full authority to require meat recalls and to identify where tainted meat has been shipped and sold; and slow the production line to enable more accurate inspection and greater care in handling the meat, which would also reduce the high worker injury rates. Finally, the extreme consolidation into a few corporate hands must be checked, to break the meat industry's stranglehold on regulatory policy.

It's time to put the health and well-being of America's eaters, animals and food industry workers ahead of meat corporations' desire for maximum profits and control.

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