



Food 911

What you should know about our nation's food supply and the benefits of eating locally grown food

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Have you seen the "No Farms, No Food" bumper sticker? Following the flurry of disease outbreaks and the discovery of dangerous organisms in spinach, beef, strawberries and onions in fast food, some might think the sticker should read, "No Local Farms, No Safe Food."

With such reported incidents on the rise, it's not surprising that some groups and organizations are more strongly advocating the benefits of locally grown food.

According to a recent article in The Philadelphia Inquirer, reporter Harold Brubaker wrote that one of the main challenges in boosting produce food safety along the entire supply chain is identifying and monitoring the variety of paths that the food can take from the farm to the consumer.

According to Don Scaffner, a professor of food science at Rutgers University, the process is "hugely complicated." He describes the system as being more "like a web than a chain."

Brubaker reported that most supply chains or "webs" start at the farm. The process may include a shipper, a packer, a repacker or processor, a distributor, a retailer or a restaurant. As the food travels from place to place, workers must maintain proper temperatures and meet other requirements. This process, which can take just a few days or more than a week, takes place before the food item ends up on a plate in front of a consumer.

(Read another food safety-related story by Brubaker.)

In light of recent reports – from Jamba Juice smoothies to Taco Bell produce – advising consumers to avoid certain products, it's easy to comprehend the urgency of the food-safety issue.

The Jamba Juice scare resulted in FDA announcing that Cleugh's Frozen Foods Inc., Salinas, CA, a wholly-owned subsidiary of SunOpta Inc., was voluntarily recalling frozen strawberries sold exclusively to Jamba Juice for use in smoothies sold in stores in Arizona, Nevada and Southern California between November 25, 2006 and December 1, 2006. Cleugh's took this action because it was concerned that they may have been contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*, stated the FDA.

Although the massive populations of cities around the world could never be entirely sustained on locally grown food, the answer for some is to grow their own food or support local growers. Perhaps locally grown food, with a focus on organic guidelines and sustainability is a step toward greater food safety.

Groups like Local Harvest and the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (ATTRA) support efforts to raise awareness about using food grown locally and thinking more about the food we eat.

According to ATTRA, the future of sustainable agriculture has never looked more promising -- or more challenging. On the one hand, the number of acres in organic production continues to rise, sales of organic foods are growing at 20 to 25 percent a year and the USDA has enlarged its commitment to sustainability. On the other hand, crop subsidies to factory farms continue to grow, and large seed and chemical companies are lobbying hard for genetically modified plants and other organisms that require agricultural chemicals. Still, more crop producers are shifting toward more sustainable practices, and more beef and dairy producers moving toward pasture-based production.

Although the supply chain for U.S. produce is regulated by the USDA and operates under the guidance of "good agricultural practices," rather than specific regulations, the USDA has measures in place to inform consumers and keep the food supply safe. In partnership with food producers and industry, the USDA has in place organizations, regulations and educational activities whose purpose it to prevent food contamination. Some of these organizations include:

Centers for Disease Control

Food safety and inspection service of the USDA

Other government-supported food safety organizations