

Letters/Opinions

Cautious consumers need facts to make own choices over food



THINKING OUT LOUD
By THAD BOX

LAST spring, 2,500 hogs were quarantined, sentenced to death and projected to be buried in our town's landfill. The hogs appeared healthy, but they had been declared toxic waste. They had apparently eaten feed contaminated by melamine.

Melamine is hardly a household word, at least not before this incident. It is an industrial chemical widely used in plastic manufacturing. Melamine "scrap" is high in nitrogen, cheap and easily obtained in fast-growing industrial nations like China. It was not the sort of thing likely to affect hog farmers.

That was before pets died from unidentified causes, and pet food companies recalled cat and dog food. News media reported that the recalled pet food contained melamine-laced wheat gluten from China.

In rapid order, media reported adulterated feed had been eaten by thousands of hogs and millions of chickens.

It might get into human food. Reporters wrote that adding melamine and cyanuric acid to animal feed was widespread in China. They were a cheap way to increase nitrogen, a surrogate used to estimate protein in feed analysis.

The U. S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Drug Administration and World Health Organization said the risk to humans from eating animals fed melamine was very low. Some of the hogs and chickens should have a reprieve. The amount of melamine in pork and poultry products from animals eating the tainted feed was diluted. Experts thought meat from the quarantined animals was safe for human consumption.

Not taking any chances

That matters little. It is beside the point. Americans are highly intolerant of food with even a hint it might put them in danger. One mad cow panics meat eaters. Apple crops have rotted because of suspected pesticide residue in juice. A cantaloupe industry was destroyed by salmonella. Spinach vanished from grocery shelves because *E. coli* contaminated one field of fresh greens. It may take years to determine the effect of the

melamine incident on pork and poultry consumption.

Information allows for choice

Some people blame the media, but it does no good to shoot the messenger.

Others blame trade policies that allow Chinese feed to be sold more cheaply in our country than we can grow it. However, our national policy is to be active in the global market. Still others blame government for not adequately inspecting all food.

The U.S. is a major importer of food. We eat few meals without some of the products coming from foreign lands. To keep food safe we need careful inspection to minimize harmful food products from reaching our tables and adequate labeling to allow us to make informed choices about the food we buy.

Food inspection agencies are understaffed and underfunded. USDA and FDA do a good job on food they actually inspect, but they are limited by inadequate budgets, conflicting jurisdictions and bureaucratic organization. At best, they only sample a small amount of food coming into this country. The system cries for investigation, reform and adequate funding.



Inspections alone, however good, cannot make our food completely safe. Inspections should be combined with labeling that allows consumers to vote with their pocketbook. In addition to data now mandated on labels, each item should include where it was grown and whether or not it has been inspected by USDA, FDA or a state inspector. The buyer could weigh the risk of eating a food that had not been inspected.

My wife says, "Give me information, and I will make the choice." If she were faced with apples from Utah, Washington, Chile and China, she would not just compare price or food safety. She would consider freshness, flavor, food miles, environmental cost and many factors. Knowing Jenny, the sight of local orchards bulldozed for housing developments would make her choose Utah apples regardless of price.

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