The Price of Delay

Mice, maggots, and eight-foot-tall manure piles. That’s what inspectors found in the hen houses that caused the recent Salmonella outbreak. The huge epidemic, which probably sickened tens of thousands of people, had begun in April. By August, two Iowa egg producers had recalled more than half a billion eggs, though most of them had already been eaten. Here’s the kicker: it could have been avoided if the government had acted sooner.

Last July I applauded the Food and Drug Administration for finally, after a decade of delay, requiring the egg industry to clean up its chicken coops and get rid of Salmonella once and for all. Little did I or anyone else know that the rules came just a few months too late.

“When infected eggs still make it to the table, we know we have more work to do,” said President Clinton in 1999. “That’s why today I am taking new action on food safety to cut in half, over the next five years, the number of Salmonella cases attributed to eggs. And our goal is to eliminate these cases entirely by 2010…”

But between 1999 and 2009, the egg-safety rule languished due to turf battles between the FDA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and due to complete neglect during the Bush years. At long last, in July 2009, the Obama Administration finalized the rule, giving egg producers a year to clean up their act.

But it was too late. By the July 2010 deadline, eggs from the filthy hen houses were already sickening thousands of Americans.

Did we learn a lesson? I hope so, because also languishing for a decade has been legislation to improve the safety of not just eggs, but all foods that the FDA regulates. (It’s hard to believe, but the FDA can’t order companies to recall foods.)

The House bill is excellent, but deficit hawks in the Senate said that it’s too expensive, so they cut inspections from once a year to once every three years. Well, the bill was cheaper before the industry got the House to slice—from $2,000 to $500—a new yearly industry registration fee to fund inspections. Now the Senate bill has no fee at all, and critics complain that it would cost taxpayers too much.

As of early September, the Senate hadn’t yet taken up the legislation. Senators need to stop talking and start voting. Then the House and Senate need to agree on a final version that contains the strongest provisions from both bills, including more frequent inspections and stronger penalties for mice, maggots, and other violations.

You can help! Call your senators (202-224-3212) and urge them to pass a new FDA Food Safety Modernization Act before they adjourn in October...and before the next outbreak.

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