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## Not good enough to eat

*Marion Nestle*. [New Scientist](#). London: [Feb 22, 2003](#). Vol. 177, Iss. 2383; pg. 25

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### Abstract (Summary)

Contaminated food is making millions of Americans ill, yet the government has done little to make the food industry clean up its act. The food industry opposes modernizing food safety laws.

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Contaminated food is making millions of Americans ill, so why doesn't the government make the food industry clean up its act, asks Marion Nestle

HARMFUL microbes kill 5000 people each year in the US, put 325,000 in hospital and cause illness in 76 million. Given that these figures are bound to underestimate the problem, you might have thought that Washington would be going to great lengths to protect the food supply from contamination. Apparently not. For reasons of history, inertia, turf disputes and just plain greed, efforts to prevent food-borne illness are being blocked at every turn.

Safety would seem to be the least contentious of food issues. Who could possibly not want food to be safe? Certainly not the public. So how to explain why the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) cannot find a way to prevent meat producers consistently violating safety procedures and shipping ground beef contaminated with harmful bacteria? Last month, in the most recent of such decisions, a federal judge ruled that the USDA had no right to close Nebraska Beef, the country's fifth-largest meat packer, because doing so might cause 11 substantial and ongoing irreparable harm" to the company.

To understand such rulings, we must enter the peculiar realm of foodsafety politics. Food is big business and highly competitive. The US food supply provides each person with 3800 kilocalories a day, nearly twice the average need. With such abundance, food companies have two choices: to induce people to choose their products over those of competitors, or to get everyone to eat more. The industry's success in encouraging Americans to "eat more" is one reason for the obesity epidemic. It works like any business: food companies advertise, but they also use the political system to pressure government officials, scientists and health professionals that no "eat less" regulation or guideline is justified.

Obesity is one consequence of food politics. Microbial contamination of the food supply is another. Contamination can occur at any stage of production, distribution and preparation. Each component of the food chain shares responsibility for safety, so there is much room for finger-pointing.

Lack of accountability pervades food-safety politics. Take the beef industry, whose practices are the most visible example of how the system works. It takes pride in its individualistic, anti-government, "cowboy" approach to its mission -- slaughtering animals for food. In his 1906 book, *The Jungle*, the writer Upton Sinclair characterised this work as "stupefying and brutalizing", and nearly a century later it remains repetitive, dirty and dangerous.

Meat companies have the legal system on their side. Sinclair's book induced Congress to pass laws in 1906 that govern meat safety to this day. They were written long before harmful bacteria were recognised as a safety problem, and take effect at the packing plant (not the farm), require visual inspection of every carcass (not microbial testing), place the burden of responsibility on USDA inspectors (not the company), and include no provision for recalling contaminated meat.

As might be expected, the industry opposes modernising these laws. It consistently resists imposition of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) plans, which involve nothing more than figuring out where contamination might occur and instituting measures to prevent it. HACCP was originally developed to protect astronauts from food poisoning in outer space, and it worked. Politics explain why such methods are less successful on Earth: companies that test for pathogens might find some.

From the industry's standpoint, contamination is someone else's problem: consumers should learn to cook; failing that, meat can always be irradiated. Under industry pressure, Congress authorised irradiation of ground beef served in schools, disclosure of the process in tiny type on package labels, and euphemistic identification of the process as "pasteurisation". The industry obtained these concessions in the usual manner. It is particularly generous to Republicans. With Bush in power, food companies expect attention to their views on food safety - and they get it.

What is most disheartening about food-safety politics is that contamination is not that difficult to prevent. Earlier this year, David Theno, the expert who fixed safety problems at Jack in the Box restaurants after their hamburgers were linked to a disastrous outbreak of *E. coli* poisoning a decade ago, told *Food Chemical News* (27 January) that designing effective safety systems is "a piece of cake". All it takes is political will, some basic intelligence and relentless testing. Left to their own devices, however, food companies will do only what they are forced to.

The costs of unsafe food to individuals and to society demand farm-to-table preventive measures and accountability. Especially now, in this era of anxiety about bioterrorism, accountability requires a government food agency independent of corporate influence, with safety high on its action agenda.

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