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Food: Another September 11 Scenario

The United States faces heightened danger of terrorist attack through imported foods

As the United States reconsiders its vulnerabilities to terrorism after the September 11 attacks, the safety of the nation's food supply has come under new scrutiny. Previously, most discussions of food safety and regulations focused on preventing accidental contamination or negligence. Now, however, those concerned with food safety also are considering the threat of terrorists, who might intentionally contaminate the U.S. food chain.

Counterterrorism experts and lawmakers recently have looked more closely than ever before at the flaws throughout the nation's food safety network. Last fall, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson expressed special concern that foreign terrorists could contaminate food imports because of lax inspection and security at U.S. ports of entry.

America's food supply has become more and more global. For instance, nearly four billion pounds of meat are imported into the U.S. each year. With that increase in the number of imports comes more opportunity for intentional contamination by terrorists. In addition, for years there have been complaints about the limited power and resources of the two main government agencies charged with overseeing food imported into the United States: the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

In the wake of September 11, security measures involving imported foods appear to be changing. One major move came at the end of 2001, when Congress passed bioterrorism legislation that included measures to address some of the problems in the food import system.

This issue of The Lipman Report will examine the risks of terrorist attacks through imported foods and consider what government and corporations can do to prevent security lapses that might allow terrorists to use imported foods as stealth invaders of the U.S. food supply.

Nature of Possible Attacks

One well-known terrorist attack on U.S. food occurred in 1984 when an American cult in Oregon contaminated 10 salad bars with *Salmonella* bacteria, sickening 751 people, in an attempt to affect the outcome of a local election, knowing it would make people too ill to vote but would not be fatal. Many experts say that the goal of terrorist acts involving food is not necessarily to kill people but to generate as much fear as possible.

Contaminating only a few imports could spread such fear, which could in turn have a devastating effect on the U.S. economy. The scenario would resemble the one that played out in Britain last summer when an accidental outbreak of foot and mouth disease among cattle virtually destroyed the nation's beef industry and caused a chain reaction in the entire continent as a result of the contamination of a relatively small portion of the food supply.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, some of the biological agents most likely to be used in a terrorist attack are botulism, *Salmonella*, *E. coli* and cholera because they are relatively inexpensive, fast to produce and easily concealed. Also, insects bearing diseases that can affect both animals and humans can enter the country through imported foods. What would worsen the blow is the introduction of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria. Some countries impose fewer controls on antibiotic use in animals and humans than the United States, producing some disease strains that could have no antidote if introduced here.

Intentional contamination of food with biological agents might not look any different from accidental contamination, and the effect could be the same. Thus, all the arguments currently circulating for increased biosecurity will also go a long way toward increasing the nation's protection against accidental contamination.

Beyond the USDA

The food inspection system in the United States started in the mid-19th century with the establishment of the USDA. By the end of the 20th century, responsibilities for inspection of various types of foods was spread among 15 different government agencies, including the FDA, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the CDC. Thus, the nation now has a patchwork system of government oversight, developed with the domestic food production and distribution chain in mind, and focused almost exclusively on accidental or negligent con-

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tamination of food. While that is still an essential function, food security—focusing on intentional contamination both domestic and from abroad—is taking center stage with the heightened threat of international terrorism.

Increasing demand for imported foods in the United States also has strained the inspection capacities developed for an earlier age. The USDA reports that, although imported foods still make up a relatively small portion of the U.S. diet, their importance grew significantly during the late 1990s. In 1995, imports grew from an average of 7.4 percent of the U.S. diet to 9.1 percent in 1998 and 1999. Among the fastest-growing imports are high-value products, such as seafood, red meats, cheese, fruits and juices, vegetables, beer and wine.

Those foods, along with most other imports, are primarily regulated by the USDA, which oversees imported meat, poultry and some fruit, and by the FDA, which oversees most other imported foods, including fish, vegetables and processed foods.

The USDA requires that foreign companies exporting to the United States have a food safety system equal to the U.S. system. The department also has the authority to inspect overseas plants. But the FDA has lacked that same authority and has relied almost exclusively on point-of-entry inspections. Currently, 175 FDA inspectors cover approximately 300 ports of entry, enabling the agency to inspect only about *one percent* of the 3.7 million shipments of imported food that arrive in this country each year. *Even when the FDA refuses entry for a particular food, it has had no authority to seize and detain that contaminated food.* As a result, contaminated food was apparently being taken to another port and often entered the country without a problem.

New Laws Regarding Food Imports

In the wake of September 11, both houses of Congress passed similar legislation in December 2001 to address the bioterrorist threat. Once the

two versions of the bill are reconciled between both houses, the law will give the FDA many new powers. For instance, inspectors will be able to seize any food item that presents “a threat of serious adverse health consequences or death to humans or animals.” The bill also will enable the FDA to detain food believed to be contaminated while seeking a seizure order and to exclude importers who engage in a pattern of trying to bring such food into the United States.

Under the provisions of the new legislation, the FDA will employ more inspectors to examine food imports, and federal agents could demand the records of food processors, importers and manufacturers. Also, any domestic or foreign facility that manufactures or processes food for use in the United States will be required to register with the FDA. In addition, the agency will have authority to mark food shipments denied entry at one U.S. port to ensure such shipments do not reappear at another U.S. port.

Many provisions to fight terrorist use of our food supply are provided for in the FY 2003 Federal Budget, which is yet to be finalized. For instance, inevitable budget increases for homeland security will have to include funding to increase the number of inspectors for imported food. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said in November that President Bush would request \$61 million “to enhance the frequency and the quality of imported food inspections and to modernize the import data system.” He said the administration will also request an additional \$46 million to hire 410 new FDA inspectors, 210 of which will be deployed to inspect food entering the nation’s ports.

Other legislation introduced last fall to address food safety and terrorism sought to consolidate the entire system of food inspection and regulation, including the various government offices that oversee imported foods, under one government agency. But the idea met strong resistance from food industry groups, who said more regulation was not the answer. Others also argued that consolidation of

food regulators and inspectors was not a panacea. The proposed legislation was defeated in Congress in November 2001. However, Tom Ridge, Director of the Office of Homeland Security, recently brought up the idea again, saying the Bush administration is considering anew some consolidation of food inspection and regulation duties.

Preventing Terrorism through Imported Foods

The FDA maintains that imported food safety is best monitored at and by the country of origin, but the varying levels of will and resources within countries that import into the United States make that a complicated ideal to oversee. Early this year, the FDA released an extensive set of guidelines for safeguarding against terrorist contamination of food, including imports. While these were only guidelines and not requirements, they signaled a change in thinking about safety issues surrounding imported food—from an emphasis on preventing accidental contamination to additional focus on terrorist tampering. In general, the guidelines encouraged importers to increase screening and monitoring of staff, facilities, plant access, and shipments of materials into and out of plants. They also promoted development of a security strategy to respond to any tampering or terrorist activity. The guidelines recommended regular evaluation of all security and response procedures as well.

Once the food reaches U.S. ports, the government's regulatory authority increases, as does its responsibility for food safety. That is where new surveillance measures, testing procedures and preventive measures are being considered.

One such measure is irradiation. With imported foods, irradiation can be done in the country of origin or when the food arrives at U.S. ports. Although irradiation has been deemed safe by the U.S. government for many years, it has been slow to gain consumer acceptance. Irradiation exposes food to low levels of radiation that kill pests and disease-producing organisms and can prolong the freshness of foods, but it can also wilt lettuce, turn poultry pink and sap vitamins from food.

While it eliminates some danger, critics say it may give a false sense of security in the face of terrorist contamination of food, causing food producers to be lax with other security measures.

International organizations have been formed to try to establish baseline standards for food safety and trade around the world. The Codex Alimentarius Commission was created in 1962 by two United Nations organizations, the Food and Agricultural Organization and the World Health Organization. Within the United States, Codex activities are coordinated by the USDA, the FDA and the EPA.

Cooperation among countries to ensure food security must be on the agenda of all international regulatory bodies, just as food safety was part of the overall security plan at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City this year. That plan may have provided a primer for the level and degree of international procedures needed to ensure food security. In Salt Lake City, trucks delivering food were not allowed in the Olympic park but were funneled through an off-site warehouse for FDA inspection. Local health officials worked with federal officials to monitor food venues and to track any recurrent health symptoms that may have signaled a bioterror attack. And of course, security screening for staff and access to food supply areas was extremely tight.

Increased surveillance of food imports already underway is a crucial first step. But experts insist that ensuring imported food security must be addressed from a systematic point of view. Government has a role. So do the food producers, the food industry and even consumers. It is a shared responsibility all along the food chain.

What the Private Sector Can Do

The private sector—and especially the food industry itself—has a particularly important part to play in preventing problems with imported foods.

Partly to mobilize against a terrorist threat and partly to try and head off increased government

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regulation, about 90 food-processing and agriculture industry groups joined government agencies to create the Alliance for Food Security in the wake of September 11. The group has drafted some self-regulatory guidelines, such as requiring background checks on food-processing employees and installing security cameras in plants. The alliance, along with others in the food production and distribution chain, has been pushing for improving communication at all points in the process. A faster, more efficient, centralized system of reporting tainted imported ingredients, for instance, would help prevent terrorism from infiltrating the food chain through imported foods.

Food processing plants are also being encouraged to deal only with importers who abide by strict security regulations, even if better prices are available from less-familiar importers. Experts say food producers need to be clear on the source of their ingredients and ask questions about what security measures suppliers have in place before the food arrives at their plants. All those in the food industry who deal with consumers are also encouraged to clarify to their customers the importance of promptly reporting any tainted food products.

In corporations outside the food industry, security directors should be vigilant and increase communication with those who supply and staff their food service facilities. A new effort should be made to monitor where the food that a company serves its employees and visitors comes from, who comes into contact with it before it is served, and what security measures suppliers take. For instance, new vigilance is required in securing shipments of food. Security directors should ask suppliers specific questions about locks and surveillance procedures in shipping practices, and they can question the screening procedures suppliers use in hiring employees. With imported foods, organizations should do a complete background check on the imported food served to their employees, tracing it and ensuring proper

security from the growers to the processors to the transport of the food, at every point along the way to their company's food service facility.

Also, corporations should make sure traveling employees understand the significance of obeying customs regulations governing food brought into the United States. Gone are the days where sneaking in favorite foods from other countries is a minor offense. Now, it is important to stress that even an orange, carried into this country from a trip abroad, could contain bacteria or insects implanted by terrorists.

As Americans have grown accustomed to more variety in foods and certain seasonal foods year-round, food imports fill those demands in a way that benefits both the country and its exporters. With that international cooperation comes the important acknowledgment that food security and preventing terrorist contamination of imported foods is a global issue. International and national organizations that have roles in food production and distribution must implement new innovations and take a more aggressive, focused approach toward safety and security. The practical ways to combat the threat of terrorism must be tackled by cooperation on all fronts: international, national and local. Immediate and urgent steps to protect the United States of America and other countries are essential for the well-being of the people of the world.

Regulation and inspection of imports is just one defense against terrorist contamination of our food supply from abroad, and must be heightened in light of the increasing threat. But in order to prevent terrorist use of imported foods as a stealth invader, everyone—government, the food industry, the private sector and consumers—must remain cooperative, vigilant and determined to guard against this threat.



The Lipman Report Editors