

Food Safety: Feds & Farmers

Descriptive Summary of Session

Food safety is an evolving challenge requiring partnerships to make the system work. There is a great deal of common ground among stakeholders on food safety--consumers, producers and regulators. USDA has responsibility for the safety of about 20% of the food supply, with FDA covering the remainder. While the two institutions conduct food safety inspections, FDA's mission is to advance public health, while the USDA has a mission to serve agriculture. This being said, the FDA operates under a number of frameworks that serves to minimize the impacts on farmers and producers, including taking into account scale and economics on its implementation of regulations.

For producers who are encountering the FDA for the first time, it comes as a surprise that the FDA has a long history of working with agriculture prior to the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). FDA has regulated animal health and feed products and shell eggs, and has been working on produce safety with the agriculture community for 15 years. The central lesson from this experience is that the idea of food safety and public confidence go hand in hand.

The FSMA shifted the focus of food safety from response-oriented to a science-based, prevention-focused system that addresses risks from farm to table to reduce the chance of contamination. The Act also included new tools to insure imported foods meet the same standards. Implemented well, the Act will establish a harmonized system that achieves public health goals. To this end, the FDA has released several rules related to a range of areas that take into account reasonable interventions at reasonable cost.

The implementation phase of the FSMA will be very complex. Among the challenges is how to work with state partners to ensure there is compliance to reduce outbreaks and maintain public confidence. The FDA is interested in educating before it regulates to support growers and provide the technical support in a collaborative way with the community to assist growers with implementation, to help them understand the expectations and requirements, and to figure out how to achieve the FSMA's goals. The FDA is still early in the process of implementation, but this is also a very complex and involved process, so there is a need to engage fully with state and community partners.

Even while media coverage of food safety issues would give the impression that the United States is not doing a sufficient job on food safety, the reality (according to CDC monitoring) is that foodborne illnesses are down. This divergence between perception and reality is due in part because of PulseNet and the ability that now exists to trace back an outbreak to the source and to connect outbreaks.

There is a distinction between the theory of how the FSMA implementation is intended and how it has worked out in effect. A recent pilot project on inspection implementation for cantaloupes demonstrated a high degree of inconsistency with respect to expectations, protocols, and practices, with discrepancies across inspections and significant deviations from established guidelines and the prescribed scope of the review. Additionally, the inspectors involved in the pilot had little if any experience on farms, were unprepared and did not have appropriate equipment, were inappropriately trained, and used this process to issue official citations of violations that were both inaccurate and

outside the purview of the inspectors authority. Perhaps most frustrating with regard to this has been the FDA's unwillingness to retract or fully correct the citations that were issued incorrectly.

A remedy for this situation would bring the regulatory and policy units of the FDA under the same umbrella so that there is no disconnect between policy and practice. Moreover, the FDA does not have a process to correct their mistakes, and particularly as they develop this protocol, there needs to be a system to resolve the problems that will arise from an inspection workforce that is not adequately trained and does not include inspectors with sufficient farm experience.

Another important food safety issue that is garnering attention is the use of antibiotics as a feed additive for livestock. It should be noted that the percent of antibiotics used in agriculture that are important to human health is a modest 18 percent, and it is on these areas of overlap between animal use and human health where discussions should take place.