

## **The Politics of (Food) Politics**

Senate Bill 510, the Food Safety Modernization Act, passed in a landslide bi-partisan vote in the Senate on November 30<sup>th</sup>. The amended bill, which originated in the House and has been stalled in Senate debate for months, will move back to the House, and if passed, will be the largest food safety reform legislation since the 1930s. The House must move by the end of session in December, and President Obama is urging a swift and affirmative vote.

The crux of the bill involves empowering the FDA to recall tainted foods, increase inspections, demand accountability from food companies, oversee farming, and to have greater regulatory power over imported foods. Currently the FDA can only *respond* to food safety issues, such as the massive salmonella outbreak originating in the Wright County Egg farms in Iowa, rather than monitoring the health and safety of foods before illness and death occur. S.510 essentially will require food producers—be it farmers or livestock growers—to comply with safety plans for each item they produce, and to allow inspections and greater access to record keeping.

The bill does not consolidate overlapping functions at the Department of Agriculture and several other federal agencies that oversee aspects of food safety. “Too many cooks spoil the broth” might be an applicable adage for the current clumsy approach to food oversight and monitoring.

The bill has been hotly contested by both micro and mega ag, and fomented such a host of propaganda that food pundits Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser were inspired to respond, most notably in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*.

Rumors of S.510 banning home gardening and seed saving abounded in the blogosphere, and small farmers were horrified at the reality of crippling paperwork that the passage of the bill could have meant for them. The Tester Amendment (sponsored by Sen. Jon Tester, D-MT) fortunately made it into the bill’s return to the House, despite vigorous opposition by big ag. The Amendment states that producers who gross under \$500,000 and who sell more than half their products directly to consumers or local restaurants and retailers will be “exempt from the HACCP (hazard analysis critical control points) and produce safety standards provisions.” Local in this case is defined as within the state or 275 miles of the producer. Small farms are still responsible for the safety of their products, however, and are subject to the same inspections or restrictions in the event of pathogen outbreak.

As to the fears of government control of the backyard veggie patch, neither research nor text of the bill revealed facts to back up this claim.

And what is industrialized food’s beef? The bottom line, of course. Although corporate structures include the machinery (i.e. staff and financial resources) to

incorporate the safety plans required by the bill, the expenses will be high. Their claims that products from small producers will taint their newly tidied food supply are laughable; 99% of food borne illnesses or recalls originate from large-scale food producers.

While no legislation is perfect, and one can bemoan the existence of corporate food machines in general, the fact is *some* accountability and control needs to be in place to police the monoliths of world food production. The Tester Amendment is good news for local small food producers, and those of us who grow our own need not fear the long arm of Uncle Sam snatching away our heirloom tomatoes. The ultimate passage of the bill and the resulting level of government efficacy remain to be seen; for certain the battle of David and Goliath will still play out over the world food stage.