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Food safety: Finding a path to resolution

The debate over food safety is one of continuous controversy and confrontation, to say nothing of confusion and contradiction.

Lost in the headlines, accusations, and continuing discussion, however, is recognition that there are several issues of common concern to all parties involved in the food safety discussion. Focusing on those points of common concern can be the first step toward a satisfactory resolution of many of the most serious issues being discussed. Some helpful work has been done in defining those points of common interest by the University of California's Agricultural Issues Center (AIC) in its recent report entitled "Quandary," which details the results of a symposium on chemicals in the human food chain.

The AIC study team, led by research scientist Sandra Archibald of Stanford University, helps us focus the public debate. While there are many points of difference between parties to the debate, the team argues compellingly that everyone would benefit from more attention to the points of agreement.

First of all, everyone among the many interest groups interviewed by the team expressed concern about current food safety standards. Everyone wants food to be clean, wholesome, nutritious, and of high quality.

But there are great variations in the standards that different groups think should apply. Producers believe safety standards are at least adequate. Regulators say the debate obscures the fact that California has the toughest produce regulatory system in the nation. Consumer advocates say that uncertainty about safety standards exists and that it justifies widespread doubt about the risks consumers face. Consumers themselves have a great concern that suspected or known cancer-causing chemicals are used in food production and that they pose long-term health risks.

Second, everyone agrees there is a need to improve the scientific data base used in assessing and managing benefits and risks from chemical technologies. Variations exist here, too. Regulators feel that the credibility of their science is being challenged. They point out that risk standards established for food are determined by the political process at different times, resulting in inconsistencies. Chemical manufacturers believe overly strict regulations are creating serious economic problems. Consumer advocates say that confidence in current guarantees about food safety standards is eroded by bad data.

Third, everyone wants more effective but less expensive regulations. Producers seek more self-regulation. Consumer groups claim agriculture has biased the regulatory process. Scientific risk assessors say that legislation often gets ahead of science, resulting in assessments that are technically infeasible.

Understanding the perceptions of each group is a critical first step in developing compromises that will resolve food safety problems as they exist today.

One of the first questions to be addressed is so fundamental it seems foolish to ask it. Yet the question, "How safe is safe?" is fundamental to the issue. Consumers seek "safe" food. Today, however, there is no consensus about safety. The Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) sets a framework that balances environmental and health risks associated with pesticides against economic impacts. At the other extreme, the 1958 Delaney amendment to the Food and Drug Act sets an absolute zero, or no-risk, standard for carcinogens in processed foods. Between those we have other standards. Proposition 65 defines no significant risk as one additional cancer in 100,000 people. The California Birth Defects Prevention Act (SB 950) accepts the U.S. Food and Drug Administration *de minimus* risk standard of one in a million from lifetime exposure to residues in food.

Which is acceptable? Is one in 100,000 or one in 1,000,000 or no-risk better? The answer is not as obvious as it might first appear. The no-risk standard in Delaney, for example, has never been used to withdraw an older pesticide. But it has been used to deny registration of new pesticides, leaving in use still older materials, some with perhaps greater health risks.

Another variation occurs in deciding which group should be protected at the determined level. Should we establish standards for the highest risk groups, such as farm workers, and apply them universally, or establish standards for risk that are based on society as a whole?

Risk analysis needs to be improved as part of the process. Currently, risk standards often are set by public policy negotiations rather than on a scientific basis. Science needs to improve its data and assessments and also its communication of risk information to the public and policy makers.

A key point made by the AIC study team is that consumers, producers, and policy makers must have confidence in those who establish and manage risk levels. Without cooperation and compromise among all the parties, it will be impossible to achieve a satisfactory resolution to this debate.

Our food is safe in a historical and relative sense. But the public wants better safety standards and needs more confidence in those standards. Public concerns can be met with a cooperative approach by all parties involved. Failing in that approach, the public will suffer from a policy that evolves inconsistently by reacting from crisis to crisis.