

Why Eggs Became a Hazard

The reasons the American food safety system has not been able to eliminate the threat of salmonella.



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The Panic Will Subside

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Like most other serious food-borne hazards, salmonella is long familiar, all-natural and on the decline (down 10 percent over the last decade). Fortunately, we're doing better at tracing it quickly.

More federal regulation will benefit large food and agribusiness companies at the expense of smaller producers.

Advocates cite the current outbreak, at last report limited to two related Iowa egg farms, as reason to enact pending legislation that would intensify federal regulation of food-making in the name of safety. Large food and agribusiness companies have generally signed off on most of the new proposals as acceptable. Many smaller producers, on the other hand, suspect there will be less room for them, and for local variety generally, in this reassuring new world of business and government cooperation.

Consider the example of 2008's now notorious Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act. In the wake of panic over toy recalls -- most notably mass-market imports with traces of lead paint -- the law was passed to bipartisan acclaim and with support from giant toymakers and retailers, and proceeded to impose tough new regulations on makers of children's wares whether or not their products had ever been linked to any risk. Two years later, Big Toy -- more than capable of spreading testing and regulatory costs over large unit sales -- is back prospering, while hundreds of small and distinctive producers have gone out of business or abandoned harmless lines of childrens' goods.

Do today's market incentives somehow encourage negligence among egg farmers? It's hard to see how. The two producers implicated in the current recall face huge losses (and rightly so, if they've been at fault) as retailers and

consumers shun their wares, with or without added exposure from liability lawsuits.

The panic will eventually subside, and food-borne illness rates will proceed on their gradual decline. The loss of local power to Washington will remain.

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