

Hold the Tomato, Lettuce

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By Rep. Anna Eshoo

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While some hamburger lovers aren't taking much comfort from the Food and Drug Administration's recent decision to allow the irradiation of red meat to kill disease-spreading bacteria, there really is more to worry about than beef.

Most produce consumed in the United States is safe. But there's a growing chance that the lettuce and tomatoes sitting atop our burgers may contain an array of diseases that could ruin anyone's lunch. Fortunately, Congress and the administration are launching an effort to ensure that imported and domestic produce will be safe enough for fast-food drive-throughs and our dinner tables.

As health-conscious Americans heed the call to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables each day to cut down on cancer and heart disease, the demand for year-round access to fresh produce means that up to 70 percent of fresh produce sold in the United States comes from other countries during some seasons. Last year, 38 percent of all fruit and 12 percent of all vegetables consumed by Americans came from overseas.

Americans routinely are warned to watch what they eat when visiting countries that sell produce to us. Yet there is little reason to believe that fruits and vegetables grown in these countries are any safer to consume when they are exported to the United States.

At the same time, no guidelines exist for good agricultural or manufacturing practices for produce grown here or abroad.

Not surprisingly, there have been several outbreaks of illnesses in the United States associated with produce over the last few years: cyclospora infection from Guatemalan raspberries; cholera from frozen coconut milk processed in Thailand; salmonella from Midwestern bean sprouts; and cyclospora infection from lettuce grown in the United States and Peru. Severe diarrhea, weight loss, vomiting, chills, dehydration, depression and cramps are just some of the symptoms experienced by thousands of Americans infected with these diseases.

As cases of produce-related infections increase in number, FDA inspectors increasingly find themselves unable to stop the problem at our borders. Thanks to budget cuts, FDA inspections of food imports have dropped by 50 percent since 1992, with only one or two out of every 100 imported food shipments being inspected today. In 1992, FDA inspectors sampled 30,000 imported food items from 1.1 million shipments. Four years later, they were able to sample 17,000 items from twice the number of imported food shipments. Further, FDA inspectors lack the authority to automatically stop food imports from countries that are known to have weak food safety systems.

The FDA clearly needs authority to police imported produce and improve the safety of food consumed in the United States. That's why I've introduced the Safety of Imported Food Act. My initiative would give FDA inspectors the authority they need to stop the importation of food that has not been prepared, packed and held under conditions that meet U.S. safety requirements.

Under the legislation, if an FDA inspector has requested and subsequently been denied access to the place where a food product is processed or stored in order to inspect it at a reasonable time and in a reasonable manner, the agency can flat out stop the importation of that food into the United States. This proposed inspection system is similar to the one used to halt the importation of potentially unsafe meat and poultry. My bill also authorizes the FDA to develop a plan for getting this overseas inspection program up and running.

The Safety of Imported Food Act was not developed in isolation. It was written in conjunction with the administration as part of a broader effort to improve the safety of fruits and vegetables grown in the United States and abroad.

The administration and the agricultural community have embarked on a year-long effort to develop guidelines on good agricultural and manufacturing practices for fruits and vegetables. The guidelines will take into account differences in crops and regions and will address potential food safety problems throughout the food production and distribution system, such as sanitation, worker health and water quality.

The guidelines, scheduled for release this year, will be the first safety standards ever developed specifically for produce. They are targeted to improve farming and manufacturing practices for marketing fruits and vegetables in the United States.

With incidents of produce-related illnesses increasing and Americans becoming more aware of the dangers lurking in their sandwiches and salads, it is imperative for Congress to pass the Safety of Imported Food Act and the funding needed to implement the legislation.

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