

## **Who's Your Farmer?**

We are what we eat.

That simple truth runs headlong into the complexity that is our food system and into HR 2749, the Food Safety Enhancement Act of 2009, which the House of Representatives just passed.

As the Obama administration and Congress update the nation's food safety laws and regulations, it's critical that they don't unintentionally damage the part of the food system that's actually working—the place where farmers and fishermen are connecting directly with eaters.

Food safety issues keep coming back to the same themes—contaminated meat, processed product recalls, illnesses that seem to center on fast food restaurants where the initial source of the contamination can't be located. And the answers revolve around more FDA inspectors, more USDA oversight, food safety plans, full electronic traceability of all food (and animals) as it moves around the country and world.

At a deeper level officials try to ignore the widespread and intensive use of pesticides and the rapid spread of genetically engineered foods through the food supply because those are separate issues. Yet they are all part of an industrial system in which more and more of our food supply is either grown or processed by fewer and fewer companies and distributed through an increasingly concentrated chain of retailers.

There's a simpler solution. We need to encourage more people to rebuild connections with their local and regional food supplies. Across the country hundreds of thousands of families shop at farmers' markets, participate in Community Supported Agriculture (and now Community Supported Fishery) programs, support their local retailers who in turn buy from local farmers, and eat at restaurants that feature the name of the farm on the menu. In turn, many of these farmers are also processors, making jams and jellies, cheeses, and more, to supply these growing markets. The resurgence of quality American cheese production, for example, has been led by on-farm producers, who are rightly concerned with quality in every aspect of their work.

The farmers MOFGA works with are oriented to the whole—the production, the marketing, the people who are eating the food they raise, how they might do things better, even the aesthetics of food, while the FDA is used to addressing pieces of the food system, as is USDA. If you are eating from an industrial food system, you want the kinds of systems and protections that FDA and the consumer groups and Congress are considering. If you grow food for, or buy food from, a more holistic system,

you're appropriately bewildered by what's being asked or expected with HR 2749.

We're not going to reconcile these worldviews in HR 2749, or any other piece of federal legislation. We do need to defend the kind of farmers we represent (and are!), and the people who want to buy from them. HR 2749 could encourage more of this diverse, local food production through two simple steps: Exclude on-farm processors from paying a \$500 annual "facility registration fee," and use existing state and local licensing systems to oversee food safety for farmers and small processors. Then FDA and USDA could focus their attention where it's really needed—on the big food processing facilities and distribution systems that are at the heart of the food safety problems in this country.

If HR 2749 can't find a way to do that, we need to articulate for Congress that difference between industrial farming systems and local, holistic systems as the reason we can't support specific provisions or the whole bill.

You are already taking significant steps to support and encourage a safer food supply if you can answer the question, "Who's your farmer?"

--Russell Libby