

Editorial: U.S. needs to rework food safety system

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The job of keeping our food wholesome has become more difficult as food itself has become more complicated. Because processed foods include ingredients from many sources, it is hard to trace the origin of pathogens. A package of ground beef, for instance, is no longer put together by a butcher pushing a single hunk of meat through a grinder; these days it includes trimmings from many cattle and multiple slaughterhouses. That means even a small quantity of meat contaminated with E. coli has the potential to taint tremendous amounts of hamburger meat sent out across the country.

Then again, if anything is more complicated than our food, it's our byzantine system for checking its safety. At least 15 agencies are involved, but sorting out the responsibilities of just the two main ones – the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Agriculture – is hard enough. Consider a frozen pizza: The cheese is inspected by the USDA, the other ingredients and toppings by the FDA. (Though if you buy your pepperoni separately, it is the USDA's job.) The FDA regulates produce, but the USDA oversees the agreements under which growers police.

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