

MASTIO: Dead bodies demand organic food moratorium

A less-than-serious look at how old technology could kill us

Right now, someone nearby is buying organic bean sprouts. It may be the last thing he ever does. Last week's E. coli outbreak in Germany - potentially traced to an organic farm - was more deadly than the largest nuclear disaster of the last quarter-century.

Indeed, in the past two years, two public safety stories have dominated global news headlines - an explosion and oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and a nuclear power plant meltdown in Japan. Yet in the recent German organic-food-disease outbreak, nearly twice as many people already have died as in the two other industrial disasters combined.

In response to the oil spill, countries all over the world have stopped or curtailed deep-water oil drilling as new safety and environmental regulations are designed and implemented. And ground hasn't been broken on any new nuclear power plant in Europe or the United States since news of the Japanese meltdown broke. Germany is developing plans to mothball its whole nuclear industry.

Yet, 23 deaths and more than 1,000 hospitalizations caused by an industrial accident at an organic farm in northern Germany have caused no such newfound caution toward the expansion of that industry. It is easy to understand why. Organic farming has a reputation for being the domain of small-scale family businesses focused on caring for the Earth more than profits. Every organic-produce customer I interviewed at three supermarkets since the German outbreak began have cited better health as a key reason for buying organic food.

That's exactly what the organic industry wants them to think. In a question-and-answer article directed at consumers, the Organic Trade Association says this: "There is mounting evidence at this time to suggest that organically produced foods may be more nutritious. Furthermore, organic foods ... are spared the application of toxic and persistent insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and fertilizers. Many EPA-approved pesticides were registered long before extensive research linked these chemicals to cancer and other diseases."

If that view of the organic industry was ever true, it has changed over the past 20 years. Organic food has grown into a multibillion-dollar global food enterprise driven by the very same bottom-line pressures that safety advocates blame for Tokyo Power and BP putting their corporate profits before public safety. If you don't believe it, ask yourself why organic bean sprouts cost twice as much as modern bean sprouts. In a word, greed.

The scale of the danger we ignore by pretending organic food isn't a business like every other is nearly unimaginable. According to World Health Organization statistics on E. coli deaths, in just the past two years, more people have been killed by the disease than all fission-related events since the dawn of the nuclear age - even if you include the use of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The time has come for even the mighty organic lobby to accept the precautionary principle - the idea that it is better to be safe than sorry when it comes to organic farms' potentially deadly practices. Until we know for certain that the outbreak could not have been caused by the suspect organic farm, we must act to protect the public from the unknown risks of organic practices.

First, the Obama administration needs to impose a timeout in the expansion or opening of any new organic farms while regulators and federal safety experts examine the ongoing dangers presented by organic food.

The core of organic farming is the rejection of a century's worth of scientific advances. The same risks that Christian Scientists take with their own children when they reject modern medicine, organic farmers are eager to take with your children when they reject modern agriculture.

Second, before organic farms are allowed to expand again, the industry must prove that ignoring modern technology does not hold hidden risks to public health or the environment. A permitting program for obsolete technology, perhaps as part of the existing agricultural or environmental permitting program, should demand that old technologies outperform new ones at each site where a business proposes to open or expand using obsolete technology.

Third, each obsolete technology should require public health and environmental disaster planning for all foreseeable risks while each organic farm pays into a national fund designed to implement organic farms' disaster plans. Such plans could be accepted only after wide-ranging public comment and the opportunity to strengthen plans through extensive litigation. Afterward, a strict - and independent - inspection regime would be required to keep tough protections in place.

Obviously, the powerful organic industry would object, but the case against it is easily understood. No one would allow an electric utility to build and operate a new nuclear power plant with 1950s-era-technology without proof the design was safer than modern technology. Those who cling to the 1850s feces-based agricultural technology should face the same hurdles. As should those who reject key safety advances such as the E. coli-killing practice of irradiating suspect foods and genetic engineering, which holds promise in using natural biological processes to limit the spread of food-borne illness.

Organic farms could be required to take a page from what the Union of Concerned Scientists recently proposed for nuclear power plants. As each new organic facility is proposed and then designed, it should have to prove to an Organic Regulatory Commission (ORC) that it is safer than previously designed organic farms and safer than modern alternatives.

With the lives of children at stake - and the fact that the federal government is taking a larger role in paying for expensive health care - we simply can't allow the organic industry to continue to pretend it is no different from modern agriculture. Have I mentioned saving the children?

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