

Terrorist Potatoes

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Terrorists are targeting our pigs and potatoes. So argues the U.S. government, which has been putting our money where its fears are. The Bush administration has spent billions of dollars to prevent foreign agents from introducing diseases into livestock and crops. From Holsteins to hamburgers, though, our food supply doesn't seem any the safer for it.

Mad cow disease is today's headlines. One infected cow in Washington state has revealed the weaknesses of our food-supply system and the unwillingness of industry and government to respond to a genuine public health threat. Agro-terrorism experts, by contrast, are worried about tomorrow's headlines.

"We don't want to get so self-important that we think the only way to do damage to our country is by attacking human beings," Arthur Kaplan, a University of Pennsylvania bioethicist, told Minnesota Public Radio last year. "You could certainly bring this country to its knees by attacking its food supply."

"We're not going to run out of food because of a terrorist attack," said agro-terrorism researcher Anne Kohnen. "But the loss of markets overseas could be devastating." Agriculture is 13 percent of the United States gross domestic product and agricultural exports total \$140 billion annually: a fat bull's-eye for terrorists.

American livestock, concentrated in certain areas (such as pigs in the Midwest) is particularly vulnerable. An outbreak of hoof-and-mouth disease, such as the one that devastated the British cattle industry, could cost the U.S. industry \$24 billion. And this figure, according to Harley Moon, University of Iowa emeritus professor of veterinary pathology, underestimates the full damage because it doesn't include indirect costs like lost tourism revenues.

This all sounds alarming. But it's largely hypothetical. The only case of agro-terrorism in the United States was the result of domestic actors: a religious cult that infected several Oregon salad bars with salmonella in 1984. Nor have there been many cases of agro-terrorism overseas.

The United States used Agent Orange against the Viet Cong's food supply in the 1960s. Palestinians have alleged several cases of Israeli settlers poisoning nearby Arab farms. Taiwan suspects that China is behind the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease among its hogs in 1997. But these are isolated examples. To date, there have been no American correlaries.

September 11 changed the terms of the debate. Only in October 2001 did the U.S. government list crops and livestock as critical infrastructure to protect against potential attack. At a time of non-military budget cuts, the mere mention of the word "terrorism" can open the government's purse strings, and the post-9/11 initiatives have come in a flurry.

The Food and Drug Administration, responsible for ensuring the safety of 80 percent of the U.S. food supply, hired 655 field personnel to improve monitoring of food safety, doubled the number of ports it staffs, and quintupled the number of import inspections.

As a result of the Bioterrorism Act, which went into effect this past December, an estimated 400,000 food and beverage companies worldwide are required to register with the FDA or risk having their products stopped at the border. The Department of Homeland Security's includes more import inspections, more monitoring of feedlots and greater security in the food industry as part of its Operation Liberty Shield. Still in the planning stages: Operation Bioshield, the administration's plan to spend \$6 billion for new treatments and vaccines against whatever terrorists might throw at us, which would include zoonotic diseases that can jump species such as anthrax, mad cow disease and West Nile virus. All of this money spent and precautions taken and what happens? A mad cow shows up in Washington state just in time to steal this year's Christmas from the beef industry. The Bush administration fingered Canada as the source of the infection. But plenty of fingers had been pointed domestically before that ailing Holstein entered our food supply.

According to a series of 2003 reports from the General Accounting Office, there aren't enough inspectors to look at all the food and livestock coming into the country. And despite the anthrax scare of two years ago, our bulk mail facilities don't

sufficiently screen imports.

The real threat to U.S. agriculture, however, comes not from outside actors eager to exploit these holes in our security system. Nor does it come from domestic terrorists, religious cults or even the animal activists and opponents of genetically modified food sometimes identified as potential disrupters in the reports of terrorism experts.

The real threat comes from the very structure of U.S. agriculture. We are more than capable of poisoning ourselves without foreign assistance.

The U.S. livestock industry, for example, is so highly concentrated that a natural outbreak of disease can spread rapidly. Animals are pumped so full of antibiotics and steroids that their resistance has been considerably lowered (a resistance that may be passed on to humans through the meat). The industry has resisted safety measures—including banning cannibalistic feed and keeping downer cattle out of the food supply—until forced to do so. It still balks at point-of-origin labeling of meat.

The declining profit margins in agriculture have pushed farmers toward planting huge tracts of land with a single crop. The lack of genetic diversity puts our money crops at risk. A repeat of the devastating Southern Corn Leaf Blight of 1970 would cost billions.

Further, with genetic engineering, it is not entirely clear whether we're introducing potentially destabilizing genes into the food supply. Even if the modified food proves safe for human consumption, the effects on the environment remain unknown. A 1998 experiment at Cornell University demonstrated that pollen from genetically modified corn killed off a good number of monarch caterpillars. Knocking out a link in the food chain can do irreparable harm.

Meanwhile, the sheer sloppiness of the food industry poses as much a risk as anything a terrorist could devise. In 1994, a salmonella outbreak sickened more than 200,000 people. *E. Coli* and listeria outbreaks in 2002 led to several deaths. As Eric Stosser pointed out in his book *Fast Food Nation*, "Anyone who brings raw ground beef into his or her kitchen today must regard it as a potential biohazard, one that may carry an extremely dangerous microbe, infectious at an extremely low dose."

Agroterrorism, while potentially devastating, remains little more than a set of hypothetical worst-case scenarios. The threats to our food supply posed by industry concentration and monocropping, corporate resistance to health-and-safety concerns, and untested genetic engineering are more real and immediate. Yes, mad cow disease is certainly a frightening threat, but so far it has affected only a single cow. Mad agriculture disease, on the other hand, infects the whole industry.