

It's Wednesday, do you know where your vegetables are?

By Lois Levin

Wednesday, October 25, 2006

Each year 76,000,000 Americans suffer food poisoning; 300,000 require hospitalization and 5,000 people die. These numbers imply much human suffering. The US food supply is highly vulnerable to contamination, even here in Metropolitan Boston.

Michael Pollen, in a recent op-ed piece in the NY Times, cuts to the quick: "Today 80 percent of America's beef is slaughtered by four companies, 75 percent of the precut salads are processed by two and 30 percent of the milk by just one company." He adds: "Keeping local food economies healthy — and at the moment they are thriving — is a matter not of sentiment but of critical importance to the national security and the public health, as well as to reducing our dependence on foreign sources of energy."

Consider public health. Most of us felt a twinge of fear when we learned about the recent contamination of packaged spinach, and rightly so. Although we may never know the exact source of that deadly outbreak, the underlying problem is no mystery. E coli bacteria thrive in the guts and manure of feedlot cattle. Manure often finds its way onto agricultural fields and agricultural workers' hands. This problem has escalated because of the increasing centralization and scale of US agriculture. Because the growing, packaging and distribution of agricultural produce has become highly centralized and mechanized over the years, what used to be a local problem of food-borne illness that could be contained and traced is now poised- at any moment- to generate a national disaster.

There are technological fixes for this, such as increasing radiation treatment of our food supply to eliminate bacterial agents. There are also political fixes, such as government enforcement of strict separation of animal feedlots and produce fields. These solutions, however, exact a big price. Not so much in dollars; the large corporations involved in agribusiness are marvels of efficiency and can absorb the financial cost. The greatest price is borne by the public, because enacting these measures reinforces the trend of limiting consumer access to fresh, ripe and varied produce.

Consider national security. In 2004 The US Health and Human Services chief, Tommy Thompson, publicly expressed amazement that "terrorists have not attacked our food supply, because it is so easy to do."

Consider energy and pollution. In Massachusetts, most of the domestic produce we eat travels on average 1500 miles (and often 3000 miles) from field to market. It is

transported by vehicles that run on fossil fuels.

Consider biodiversity. Look at all those uniform bags and bunches of produce in the supermarkets. We have already lost so much of the variety that promotes disease resistance. Monocultures are not natural ecosystems; they require lots of pesticides and fertilizers.

Consider local farmers. Not only does the large-scale, highly centralized production of our food supply seriously compromise human health and biodiversity, while increasing our vulnerability to terrorism, it is also putting more and more small farmers out of business. They cannot afford- and they do not need- the costly equipment and procedures mandated by governments to ensure the safety of food grown by large, centralized producers.

We consumers right here in Metropolitan Boston have choices about what we eat. Exercising those choices thoughtfully takes time and care. We can make the effort to support local farmers, to learn how and where our food is grown and about the benefits of organic food (www.nofa.org). If we don't do this, and we just "keep on truckin'", we'll be playing Russian roulette "til the cows come in.