INEQUITIES IN FOOD SAFETY REGULATIONS

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Abstract

Background: Food system surveillance has come far, from lax regulations as described in Sinclair’s1 book “The Jungle”, to today’s highly regulated, multi-agency oversight as seen in Canada. There is an assumption that food safety regulation is in place for public health protection. Pressure for food safety regulation, however, comes from market forces and international trade. While food surveillance systems are designed to count cases and number of outbreaks, regulations are more often created from the response to ‘food scares’ and value-based risk assessments by the purchasing public. Media response to food scares has caused officials to resign and regulations to be imposed regardless of actual risk to the health of the public. Furthermore, in an attempt to equalize the impact, regulations are applied across the board, despite the various sizes or market types of food producers. The inequities caused by blanket regulations result in real economic loss to small producers and, more importantly, put rural and remote communities at risk of real hunger.

Objectives: To highlight the complexity of food safety regulations and potential financial and health inequities of blanket-based regulation.

Context of work: The writing of this paper was stimulated through hearing the experiences of small farmers on Canada’s west coast. These farmers were describing new meat processing regulations impacting the viability of raising animals of the farm. This paper is part of the preparation toward a PhD in Nursing focusing on the intersection of food safety and food security as public health programs.

Results and Conclusions: Changes in food safety surveillance and regulations due to food scares such as BSE,avian flu, and Listeria, may lead to financial and health inequities caused by regulations on small producers and may place communities at risk of food insecurity.

Food Safety in Canada

There are two main federal regulatory bodies protecting the public from foodborne illness in Canada. Health Canada (HC) sets the standards for food safety and nutrition quality, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) provides federal inspection services. Health Canada is responsible for establishing policies and setting standards while administering provisions for the Food and Drugs Act that relate to public health, safety, and nutrition. The CFIA carries out federal inspections and works with federal, provincial, and municipal organizations toward health protection. Canada does not have a uniform method for collecting data on foodborne illness. The extent of foodborne disease is difficult to measure and the health impact of CFIA’s relatively new regulatory and inspection regime remains unknown.

Food Safety in the Regional District of North Okanagan

In the Regional District of North Okanagan (RDNO) in BC that earned less than $2,500 in gross receipts7. Small producers working and living within the context of the local economy, then the value is not only in the food produced, but in building a sustainable community.

British Columbia Meat Inspection Regulation

The value of food safety regulation is in the trusted standard recognized by domestic consumers and those in international trade. Small producers, who are in business to make a profit, would likely upgrade their food safety system for two reasons: for a potential market gain, and if they perceive it to be the right thing to do.

Each producer knows the context of their community and how regulation is a large part of a successful local business. The balance is in having enough regulatory controls in place while operating a viable business. Regulations that are expensive to implement and not seen as addressing food safety issues will extract resources that may be better used in other areas. It is important to know the individual context of the business to determine the greatest needs for improvements in food safety.

Food surveillance and regulation in Canada is far from perfect. The highly bureaucratic, centralized systems are focused on large producers with large budgets feeding masses of anonymous individuals around the world. The drivers of that regulatory system are primarily export markets, but are also influenced by political response to media-induced food scares. The growing microbial contaminants and emerging threats are feeding the regulatory machinery, swallowing the small producer. The food regulatory system has gone foul, requiring serious consideration and action in protection of small producers.

References


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