

THE shortest DISTANCE



The feds are trying to draw **a straight line** between a foodborne illness and its likely source, but the challenge is more complicated than it sounds.

By Richard L. Lobb, contributing editor

Suppose you buy a taco from a local eatery or taco truck — a juicy beef taco with tasty sauce, shredded cheese, tomato chunks and crisp lettuce. Then you get sick. Complain to the local health department, and the report eventually the huge mass of data flowing up to the feds that may one day affect how beef, pork and poultry processors run their businesses.

The federal agencies involved are struggling to improve their stock of information on foodborne illness — and what they do with it. They are trying to narrow the categories and organize the data in a way that should unveil previously hidden trends, which in turn will help shape national policy on food and public health. For its part, the private sector is cooperating.

“We are not in the business of making people sick,” said Joan Menke-Schaenzer, global chief quality officer of ConAgra Foods, at a recent public meeting on the topic. “Better data allows us to set priorities for new control and technology.”

THE THREE AGENCIES HAVE NEVER HAD A COMMON FRAMEWORK OF DATA ON FOODBORNE ILLNESS.

PROFUSION OF CONFUSION

For example, if it was salmonella in the beef in your taco that made you sick, that would be of interest to the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which regulates cattle slaughter and sets limits on salmonella in beef, pork and poultry. If it was E. coli O157:H7, that would set off alarm bells, because the limit for that bug is supposed to be zero.

If the cheese made you sick, that would concern the Food & Drug Administration (FDA), which looks out for *Listeria monocytogenes* in products like cheese. And if it was salmonella in the lettuce or tomatoes, that could trigger an FDA recall.

But if it was norovirus, blame the people who made your taco, because norovirus comes only from humans and is spread by sloppy handling and poor hygiene.

Sorting all this out at the federal level is mostly the job of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which analyzes data from thousands of outbreak investigations on an ongoing



CDC's Food Groups

Categories now used by
CDC for tracking foodborne
outbreaks

FINFISH

CRUSTACEANS

MOLLUSKS

DAIRY

EGGS

BEEF

GAME

PORK

POULTRY

GRAINS-BEANS

OILS-SUGARS

FRUITS-NUTS

FUNGI

LEAFY VEGETABLES

ROOT VEGETABLES

SPROUTS

**VEGETABLES FROM
A VINE OR STALK**



Associated Press

basis. But FSIS and FDA have their own data and ways of looking at things, and the three agencies have never had a common framework of data on foodborne illness. Congress passed the Food Safety Modernization Act a year ago in part to encourage the agencies to cooperate more. It requires them to “determine the most significant foodborne contaminants” and come up with “guidance documents or regulations” to deal with them.

SOURCE ATTRIBUTION

Technocrats from all three agencies are working now to improve their data, with an eye particularly on how to attribute foodborne illnesses to specific foods. That sounds easy, but it isn't: Consider how hard it is to figure out which part of the taco made you sick.

“Attribution is one of the most challenging endeavors in the world of food safety,” said Dr. Elizabeth Hagen, USDA under secretary for food safety, at the recent Foodborne Illness Source

Attribution Public Meeting in Washington, D.C. “For regulators, it is incredibly important because it tells us where we should be devoting our resources. Industry needs to know where to put their resources and where they are accountable.”

The way it works now, when CDC gets a report on an outbreak, it may implicate any of maybe 1,800 foods. CDC experts shoe-horn these into only 17 broad commodities, specifically: finfish, crustaceans, mollusks, dairy, eggs, beef, game, pork, poultry, grains-beans, oils-sugars, fruits-nuts, fungi, leafy vegetables, root vegetables, sprouts, and vegetables from a vine or stalk.

An interagency team is working to expand the list of foods from 17 commodities to many more. For example, “poultry” would be split into chicken, turkey, and other poultry and divided further into raw or RTE categories.

Some experts welcome greater clarity but warn that foodborne illness resists easy explanations.

“Anything they can do to make it transparent is an improvement,” says

Meat processors hope better capabilities in pinning illnesses to specific foods, such as tomatoes, will help reduce the regulatory scrutiny on their products.

Douglas Powell, a Kansas State food scientist and proprietor of the widely followed “Barfblog.”

“Foodborne illness happens in multiple ways in multiple sources, which makes categorization difficult,” he says, in an interview. “I am not sure how useful it is to point fingers one way or another.”

WHAT WE KNOW

CDC publishes a study of foodborne illnesses every year, but it is usually three years in arrears; the one published in 2011, then, covers the reports for 2008. That year was an oddity, with huge outbreaks attributed to peanuts and peppers. More typical was the report covering 2007, which showed that the foods most commonly associated with outbreak-related cases were poultry, beef and leafy vegetables.

CDC is working to refine its estimates. At the public meeting in Washington, an agency official gave a sneak peek at a report that is pending

publication. According to this closer analysis, the leading food commodities causing foodborne illness are leafy vegetables, dairy products, poultry, fruits and nuts, beef and pork.

What's so dangerous about leafy

vegetables like spinach and lettuce? According to Kirk Smith of the Minnesota health department and leader of a national panel on foodborne illness, the

"WE ARE NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF MAKING PEOPLE SICK."

problem isn't the food itself. It's the fact that salads aren't cooked, so they can easily spread norovirus from food handlers, which would otherwise be deactivated by the heat of cooking. (Leafy

greens can spread other foodborne illnesses, too, but norovirus is responsible for some 60 percent of foodborne outbreaks.)

BRING IT ON

The industry welcomes the focus on more specific attribution.

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FINGERED FOODS

Food groups that caused the most illnesses associated with outbreaks in 2008

COMMODITY	OUTBREAKS	ILLNESSES
Fruits-nuts	23	1,755 (peanuts)
Vine-stalk vegetables	5	1,622 (peppers)
Beef	31	952
Poultry	32	663
Pork	19	622
Leafy vegetables	27	425
Mollusk	5	280
Dairy	17	260
Finfish	30	211
Grains-beans	11	204
Eggs	9	105
Sprout vegetables	2	44
Fungus	2	19
Oil-sugar	1	13
Game	1	12
Crustacean	2	7
Root vegetables	1	5

Source: "Surveillance for Foodborne Disease Outbreaks – United States, 2008." CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Review, Sept. 9, 2011 / 60(35): 1197-1202

data allows food safety stakeholders to allocate resources appropriately and scientifically justify the decisions made," AMI Director of Scientific Affairs Betsy Booren, said at the meeting in Washington. "By having timely,

credible food attribution data, the food industry can accurately identify and improve any food safety gaps."

"The only way we can better understand what makes people sick is through this data," she says.

Outside experts see broader challenges than just getting better numbers, however. They say the entire system rests on a weak foundation caused by lack of funding at the local and state levels.

"I've seen times when the feds ... couldn't do any more with the outbreak investigation because of the inadequacies of state and local health departments," says Michael T. Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota.

"The issues are not at the federal level," he says in an interview. "The issue is the lack of resources at state and local levels. Some investigations never implicate a specific food. The analysis is only as good as the data."

The group representing the state officials doesn't put it that bluntly but tends to agree. According to a survey published last year by the Council and State and Territorial Epidemiologists, investigations of foodborne outbreaks are hampered by "lack of adequate number of staff" and "low priority" in more than half the states. The council noted that the states need to increase their professional staff by more than one-third to meet the need.

CDC, FSIS and FDA expect to have new categories in place this year and begin trying to match the data they have with the larger picture, since the available data covers less than 5 percent of all foodborne illness. In the meantime, anyone who produces, sells or prepares food might heed the advice of Doug Powell: "Stop pointing fingers and clean up your own shop, whether it is the farm, foodservice, retail or at home." 🍪

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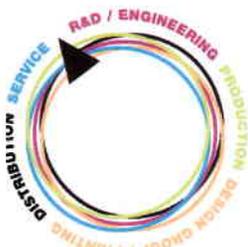


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