

Corporatists are killing us/everything!

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[Corporate] Food Industry has sway over food safety system

The food industry is jeopardizing U.S. public health by withholding information from food safety investigators or pressuring regulators to withdraw or alter policy designed to protect consumers, said a survey of government scientists and inspectors.



The study released on Monday by the Union of Concerned Scientists found one-in-four of those surveyed have seen corporate interests forcing their agency to withdraw or modify a policy or action designed to protect consumers during the past year.

Pressure to overhaul the food safety system has grown following high-profile outbreaks involving lettuce, peppers, eggs, peanuts, spinach and most recently, eggs that have sickened thousands and shaken the public's confidence in the safety of the food supply.

The 44-question survey, conducted earlier this year, also found more than 38 percent of those respondents said "public health has been harmed by agency practices that defer to business interests" at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Agriculture Department.

In addition, 31 percent said the presence of top agency decision makers who have worked for the food or agriculture industry "inappropriately" influences decisions.

"Upper level management does not adequately support field inspectors and the actions they take to protect the food supply," said Dean Wyatt, a USDA veterinarian who oversees federal slaughterhouse inspectors.

"Not only is there lack of support, but there's outright obstruction, retaliation and abuse of power," Wyatt said, noting he's been demoted by USDA for documenting violations.

A USDA spokesman said in a statement the safety of meat and poultry "is the sole function of our Food Safety Inspection Service and no other considerations should detract from carrying out their mission."

Brian Kennedy with the Grocery Manufacturers Association, which represents the industry, did not address the study directly, but said a strong partnership between its members, FDA and USDA "with the goal of protecting our food supply is in the best interest of public health."

Despite the concerns, 67 percent of the respondents -- 72 percent at FDA and 65 percent at USDA -- said their agency is "moving in the right direction." It also found 75 percent said their agency gives public health a lot or much weight in policy decisions.

"I think the good news (is) ... that we didn't in fact just get angry, grumpy people, the disenchanting responding to the survey," said Francesca Grifo, director of the Scientific Integrity Program, of UCS.

The survey was sent to about 8,000 individuals working on food safety at the FDA and USDA. Just over 1,700 employees from all levels of the food safety system responded, with more than 60 percent identifying themselves as inspectors.

Foodborne illnesses sicken an estimated 76 million people in the United States each year and are fatal to 5,000, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The massive salmonella outbreak that sparked a recall of more than a half billion eggs from two Iowa plants in August could provide momentum for the Senate to act on its own food safety bill later this month.

The House passed food reform legislation in July 2009.

(Editing by Marguerita Choy)

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