**Data Memo**

**Generally Recognized, But Perhaps Not So Safe**

*Note: This is a fictionalized version of a real story pitch.*

Most additives and ingredients in our food must be approved by the FDA before going to market. But other ingredients bypass the system entirely. Over 4,500 ingredients make up the government's “Generally Recognized as Safe” list, which includes everything from Beeswax to Ox Bile Extract. The vast majority of these ingredients were deemed safe not by government health agencies but by food manufacturers or trade associations who submit only their research results to the FDA. There is no systematic tracking of these ingredients in our food, since manufacturers don’t have to notify the FDA before adding them to food products. A [GAO report in 2010](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10246.pdf) found that the FDA is not “not systematically ensuring the continued safety of current GRAS substances,” and should strengthen its oversight.

Other countries have placed restrictions or banned outright some of the ingredients on this list. Recently the European Food Safety Authority lowered the daily limit on several food dyes commonly used in the U.S. I think it would be really interesting to make a graphic which lets readers look up an ingredient, see related studies on that ingredient, and then (if available) see if it's been banned or restricted in other countries. Obtaining data from other countries would take some time, but the FDA keeps a [list of all GRAS ingredients](:%20http:/www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/fcn/fcnNavigation.cfm?rpt=scogsListing&displayAll=true), along with descriptions of each.

**Data Sources:** [GAO Report](localhost), [FDA list of GRAS ingredients](localhost)

**What Processing Will the Data Need?** The GRAS ingredient list is available as a CSV file with

**Who Will I Need to Talk To?** An administrator at the FDA to make sure I understand how the GRAS ingredient list is compiled. A food scientist who can explain the ingredients banned in Europe.

**Thinking-Task Questions:** What are the ingredients on the GRAS list? How has the list grown or changed over time? Are there ingredients that are banned in other countries but on our GRAS list? What food that readers know (Oreo Cookies, Cheerios, etc.) contain them?