Food Safety Proposal for Reduction of Food Contamination

Matthew Mendoza

California State University, Sacramento

ENGL109W-02: Writing for GWAR Placement

Hsiang Liu

The 2009 documentary film *Food, Inc.* provided both exposure and insight to the United States' industrialized food supply chain. Chapter 3, Unintended Consequences, the film highlights the occasional, yet critical, risk of our food system: food contamination. Neglecting food safety standards, policies, and/or best practices at any point of the preparation chain may lead to anything from a mild upset stomach to death. In the case of the Barbara Kowalcyk's toddler son, Kevin, succumbed to the latter 12 days after contracting Escherichia coli (E. coli) from eating a hamburger in August 2001 (Kenner et al., *Food, inc..* 2009). Adding insult to injury, it wasn't until after three years after Kevin's death, after finding a lawyer who specialized in foodborne illnesses, the Kowalcyk's discovered that the DNA of Kevin's E. coli, specifically E. coli 0157:H7, matched the meat recalled from August 2001 (Kowalcyk, *Kevin's story*). Seeking atonement for Kevin's death the Kowalcyk's advocated and pushed for the Meat and Poultry Pathogen Reduction and Enforcement Act of 2003, colloquially "Kevin's Law", gives the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) authority inspect, test, identify pathogens, approve "inspected and passed" microbial compliance certifications, and shutdown non-compliant processing plants (Eshoo, *Meat and poultry pathogen reduction and enforcement act (2003 - H.R. 2203)* 2003); despite, the hard work of the Kowalcyks and Anna Eshoo the bill didn't pass congressional vote. The most important problem to be address in our food production industry is the prevention, compliance, and accountability of food contamination in the industrial farming industry.

Food contamination is a result of, but not limited to just, improper farming, processing, preparation, handling, or cooking. It's at any point from farming to when the

food is on one's plate harmful microbes are allowed to proliferate, depending how long are the microbes/pathogens are allowed to grow or how much of the food is consumed, may cause one to be mildly sick with an upset stomach, sick with a fever, kidney failure, or die of food poisoning; for example, farming practices like feeding cows corn, a cheap and abundant crop, has increased the incidence of E. coli, since corn raises the level of E.coli in cows' guts (Segelken, *Simple change in cattle diets could cut E. coli infection* 1998).

Of filming the documentary, around 2008, there are fewer slaughterhouses producing meat for the U.S, for this reason it only takes one sick cow to contaminate a significant percentage of the plant's production and products on grocery store's shelves if the product is not recalled in time. This problem is further compounded on the fact at the time, during the Bush JR administration, the Chief of Staff of the USDA, Mike Johanns, was the formal chief lobbyist to the beef industry and the head of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Lester Crawford, was the former executive vice president of the National Food Processors Association (Kenner et al., *Food, inc..* 2009) a total disregard, betrayal, and conflict of interest, to both regulatory agency's mission and goal in overseeing the domains of industries with scrutiny: prioritizing industry profit and gains than public safety and health standards there were entrusted to uphold.

Because of higher risks of contamination, the meat packing industry started implementing measures like using ammonia to "wash and sanitize" beef processing (Kenner et al., *Food, inc..* 2009) for human consumption; however, such measures are just stopgap solutions, for they are only treat the symptoms and are not an active,

systematic, long-term solution like finding alternative feeds to reduce E. coli in cattle stomachs. Furthermore, the runoff of the processing plants is affecting other industries of agriculture, to name a few, E. coli are found in spinach, unpasteurized apple and orange juice. Each year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 48 million people get sick from a foodborne illness, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die (*Foodborne germs and illnesses* 2020). Food contamination effects and often kill the most vulnerable members in society: pregnant women, people with weakened immune systems, children younger than five years old (like Kevin Kowalcky), and adults aged 65 and older (*People with a higher risk of food poisoning* 2022). Food contamination left unchecked and unregulated at the start of processing is only worsen down the line everything from the packaging, transport, storage, and to how it's cooked.

No more stopgap solutions! There cannot be any middle ground as to if the food we consume is safe or not. There are no shades of gray, no false dilemma, our food produced in "good faith" (no intentional harm to consumers) cannot be occasionally safe to consume. The industry needs accountability, responsibility, and to deploy solutions that are both practical and scale able. To instate both accountability and responsibility across the farming/processing plant industry is obvious congress needs to fully implement the Meat and Poultry Pathogen Reduction and Enforcement Act (Kevin's Law). Not just a few elements as was done under Obama's 2011 signing of FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) (Kowalcyk, *CFI'S STORY - Food, inc.*.). Any repeated failed contaminant tests (failure of producing food in "good faith"), the USDA needs

shutdown the meatpacking plant; in addition, instead of a corn-fed diet, which favors acid-resistant bacteria strains like E. coli O157:H7, the industry should revert to feeding their cattle foods they are accustomed to eating grass/hay and grains (Segelken, *Simple change in cattle diets could cut E. coli infection* 1998).

As the classic 1980s G.I. Joe end-of-episode where featured character(s) would face to the camera and recite the iconic PSA “Now you know. And knowing is half the battle…” your action is needed! Everyone has their own background, experience, interest, skillset and knowledge; so, to avoid setting precedence, impose a black-and-white fallacy, by suggesting ideas for action as if they are the only means for positive change, I encourage you to visit The Ohio State University’s Center for Foodborne Illness Research and Prevention (CFI) website https://foodsafety.osu.edu/ and research current problems and solutions in food contamination. Take your learnings and start a petition via https://www.change.org/ or better yet find your local representative https://www.house.gov/ advocate your local representatives to instantiate subsidies or policies that cattle must be fed their natural diet or alternatives that do not favor acid-resistant bacteria strains like E. coli O157:H7; in the long run, we need laws like Kevin’s Law to be signed into legislation so we can reliable, accountable, and responsible food producers.

References

A. Eshoo, “Meat and poultry pathogen reduction and enforcement act (2003 - H.R. 2203),” *GovTrack.us*, 22-May-2003. [Online]. Available: https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/108/hr2203. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

B. Kowalcyk, “CFI'S STORY - Food, inc..,” *Food, Inc. | CFI*. [Online]. Available: https://foodsafety.osu.edu/about/cfis-story/food-inc. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

B. Kowalcyk, “Kevin's story,” *Kevin's Story | CFI*. [Online]. Available: https://foodsafety.osu.edu/about/cfis-story/kevins-story. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

“Foodborne germs and illnesses,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 18-Mar-2020. [Online]. Available: https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/foodborne-germs.html. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

“Foods that can cause food poisoning,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 22-Feb-2022. [Online]. Available: https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/foods-linked-illness.html#:~:text=Raw%20foods%20of%20animal%20origin,vegetables%20also%20may%20get%20contaminated. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

H. R. Segelken and 1998 September 8, “Simple change in cattle diets could cut E. coli infection,” *Cornell Chronicle*, 08-Sep-1998. [Online]. Available: https://news.cornell.edu/stories/1998/09/simple-change-cattle-diets-could-cut-e-coli-infection. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

“People with a higher risk of food poisoning,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 10-Aug-2022. [Online]. Available: https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/people-at-risk-food-poisoning.html. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

R. Kenner, E. Pearlstein, K. Roberts, R. Kenner, and E. Pearlstein, *Food, inc.*. Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2009.

Annotated Bibliography

A. Eshoo, "Meat and poultry pathogen reduction and enforcement act (2003 - H.R. 2203)," *GovTrack.us*, 22-May-2003. [Online]. Available: https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/108/hr2203. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

This resource provides up-to-date information on a particular activity or legislative information and statistics. The goal of this resource is to provide an objective, bipartisan, overview and summary status of the H.R. 2203 (108th): Meat and Poultry Pathogen Reduction and Enforcement Act (AKA Kevin's Law).

B. Kowalcyk, "CFI'S STORY - Food, inc..," *Food, Inc. | CFI*. [Online]. Available: https://foodsafety.osu.edu/about/cfis-story/food-inc. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

The goal of this source is to detail Barbara's experience and what has happened since Barbara Kowalcyk's experience during the filming of documentary "Food, Inc."

B. Kowalcyk, "Kevin's story," *Kevin's Story | CFI*. [Online]. Available: https://foodsafety.osu.edu/about/cfis-story/kevins-story. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

This resource provides a deeper background information and first account story of the Kowalcyk's experience and loss of their son Kevin.

"Foodborne germs and illnesses," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 18-Mar-2020. [Online]. Available: https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/foodborne-germs.html. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

This CDC resource page defines the causes of food poisoning and the common foodborne germs including those that are more likely to lead to hospitalization: like Escherichia coli (E. coli).

"Foods that can cause food poisoning," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 22-Feb-2022. [Online]. Available: https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/foods-linked-illness.html#:~:text=Raw%20foods%20of%20animal%20origin,vegetables%20also%20may%20get%20contaminated. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

This resource calls to attention to foods that can cause food poisoning and provides information to how food can get contaminated, during which process, or stages in the food production chain.

H. R. Segelken and 1998 September 8, "Simple change in cattle diets could cut E. coli infection," *Cornell Chronicle*, 08-Sep-1998. [Online]. Available: https://news.cornell.edu/stories/1998/09/simple-change-cattle-diets-could-cut-e-coli-infection. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

This resource provides information, title would imply, how a simple change in cattle diets could cut E. coli infection from a corn-fed diet (that favors acid-resistant bacteria strains like E. coli O157:H7) to a natural diet of hay or grass.

"People with a higher risk of food poisoning," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 10-Aug-2022. [Online]. Available: https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/people-at-risk-food-poisoning.html. [Accessed: 19-Oct-2022].

This resource identifies and describes those who are most acceptable to higher risks of food poisoning. The source categorizes the four groups that face higher risks to food poisoning are adults aged 65 and older, children younger than five years old, people with weakened immune systems, and pregnant women.

R. Kenner, E. Pearlstein, K. Roberts, R. Kenner, and E. Pearlstein, *Food, inc.*. Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2009.

This food industry documentary provides both critique and insight to the industrial farming industry including, but not limited to, how our food is produced, human health, worker's rights, and animal welfare. This resource details one of many

unintended consequences of our industrialized food system: food contamination. That with the change of cattle's diet to corn increases and favors acid-resistant bacteria strains like E. coli O157:H7 that can be transferred thought the food production line and those who can be affected from E. coli contaminated foods.