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A Call to Local

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One of the biggest topics to receive national attention in agriculture over the past year has been food safety. Though the story goes back to incidents like tainted spinach from California, bad salsa at Chi Chi's restaurants and terrorist concerns from years past, support in our nation's capitol for reform was galvanized when household peanut products were implicated in early 2009.

Much of the discussion over the past year has centered on the extent to which food safety problems constitute an omnipresent threat to the public regardless of the food source, or if such factors as the size, location and distribution patterns of production and processing facilities do matter. Debate over new legislation is scheduled to come to a head in the U.S. Senate this week or soon thereafter. Perhaps ironically, this also happens to be National Farmer's Market Week, as declared by the USDA.

Do you care where your food comes from and how it was raised? If not, then you needn't read any farther, especially if you also believe our state and federal governments have sufficient knowledge and power to keep us safe, or that this is even possible, and desirable. But if you do care, you'll want to give careful consideration to one of the relatively unsung advantages of buying your food as locally as possible.

When I speak of "local," I mean in terms of the farms that produce your food, the facilities where it may get processed and the retail locations where it is purchased. If all three are within a "stone's throw," as they say, of your home, you and your family can partake with full confidence that the food is safe, or that problems will almost immediately be identified and addressed if not.

If your food is not produced, processed and procured locally, then let me proffer that your risk is greater. It's not that there's necessarily a higher risk of non-local food being tainted somehow (though often this is the case), but your relationship with the entire value chain, from "field to fork" as we often hear, is diminished, just as the task of tracking and solving food safety threats becomes more difficult.

This is to say nothing yet of the risk to the public at large when a particular food item is distributed to 40 states before a problem becomes apparent . . . or the economic loss to communities in all of those states when their food dollars leave town, with only the illusion of wealth left behind. Simply put, even without the occurrence of a food safety incident, we are already pummeled by a poor risk/benefit ratio when the food we eat is shipped across the country, or even around the world, on its way to our dinner tables.

Don't let them sell you on that "our farmers need to feed the world" line either. If we can't feed ourselves, and build our own local economies on a sound, locally-based food infrastructure, then we've got nothing whatsoever to offer the other, more struggling societies around the planet.

This is serious business, not a public relations game. You can take the first steps toward keeping your families safe, strengthening your communities, saving farmland that you can even bike to on a Saturday afternoon and feeding the world by celebrating at local farmers markets and retailers featuring locally produced and processed products this week . . . and every week.