FOOD SAFETY. The Food Safety Modernization Act (FMSA, aka Public Law 353, 21 USC 2201) was passed by the 111th Congress and signed by President Barrack Obama on 2 January 2011. A wide range of citizen and consumer-safety groups, and even elements of the food processing and agribusiness industries, supported the bill. The impetus for the passage of the FMSA built to a peak during outbreaks of foodborne deaths and illnesses and numerous emergency recalls of contaminated foods.

Accompanying the passage of the bill was an increase in outreach efforts by the US Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) to educate Latino consumers about the risks posed by contaminated foods and foodborne illnesses. According to the FSIS, the 37 million “Hispanics” in the United States experience a “higher incidence of foodborne illness than the general population.” In a report prepared for the FSIS by the registered dietician Barbara O’Brien, the higher incidence is attributable to three factors: “Traditional foods with unpasteurized cheeses and other foods prone to pathogens; Lack of knowledge of food safety, safe preparation, and safe handling of food; and, High expectations for safety of the US food supply.” The solutions proposed to address this issue include adding Spanish-speaking staff to the USDA’s Meat and Poultry Hotline, increased translation of publications including a dedicated Web area, collaboration with other organizations, and public service announcements within Hispanic radio and other media networks.

The FSIS analysis may be based on faulty science and ethnocentric or culturally biased assumptions. For example, “traditional foods” with unpasteurized cheese and milk products are not generally harmful to Latino immigrant populations, since digestive and immune systems co-evolve with dietary preferences over many generations. Indeed, some recent studies suggest that it is the “Americanization” of immigrant diets that is more clearly associated with food- and diet-related illnesses, including the advent of higher rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The extent to which Latinos may suffer from higher incidence of foodborne illnesses could be related to unsafe handling, or the fact that low-income consumers are more likely to purchase food from discount grocers and other sources that may not comply with regulations designed to protect consumers from contaminated foods. One study in 2004 suggests that education of youth improves outcomes and found that “Latino youth that received 7 nutrition education lessons had significantly greater improvements in their nutrition knowledge and food preparation skills/food safety practices compared to those who did not receive the education.”

Another study of “food safety behavioral risks” among Puerto Rican consumers, however, found that household food safety education is needed to minimize the risk of exposure to foodborne pathogens and that “employed individuals and those with higher education were also more likely to be familiar with…pasteurization” and safe food preparation and handling.

Some Latino farmers were opposed to the FSMA because it could hamper their development. The South Central Farmers Health and Education Fund, for example, opposed the rules that impose critical point “hazard analysis” on any food producer or processor with more than $500,000 in annual sales. The organization said that this is too low a threshold; a growing number of community-based agriculture and worker-owned cooperatives argued that the regulations should start with companies that exceed $1 million in annual sales. Hazard analysis is too expensive for small and medium producers, and foodborne illnesses are more likely to be associated with large-scale monoculture operations rather than small family farmers and cooperatives.

See also Food Justice and Food Sovereignty.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


FOOD SOVEREIGNTY. The concept of food sovereignty has developed through the mobilization of La Via Campesina, an international farmers’ movement that has focused on the struggles and rights of third-world peasant farmers (especially women), the impacts of neoliberal trade and agricultural policies, and the importance of working in solidarity across international borders.

Latino/as living in the United States experience food insecurities and food injustices at rates much higher than their white counterparts. For “Hispanic” households in the United States, the prevalence of food insecurity is nearly triple that of non-Hispanic whites (Nord, Andrews, and Carlson, 2009). While there is currently no singular way to measure food sovereignty, these statistics certainly point
to a significant lack of control over food consumption, particularly considering the sovereignty that Latino/as have over their diets and cultural food practices.

Food sovereignty’s emphasis on rights and issues of control shifts the focus beyond the equitable provisioning of food to address more fundamental inequalities related to land distribution, resource management, and social relations. Eric Holt-Gimenez argues that “food sovereignty is a much deeper concept than food security because it proposes not just guaranteed access to food, but democratic control over the food system—from production to processing, to distribution, marketing, and consumption” (Holt-Gimenez, 2009, p. 246).

In challenging the devastating impacts of unregulated trade and agricultural policies that privilege behemoth agri-food corporations, food sovereignty seeks to fundamentally rework the politics of food and agriculture and protect the rights of those who are actually working the land. It draws attention to the political and economic forces that displace small farmers in Latin America and other regions of the global south, many of whom have no other choice than to migrate in search of work. In this way, it elides the denigration of displaced farmers who have no choice but to migrate by acknowledging the ways that their autonomy and livelihoods have been compromised against their will. Many of these farmers have moved to the United States in search of wage work after farming in Latin America was no longer a viable option.

The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in particular, has been criticized for delivering a crushing blow to smallholder farmers in Mexico. As a result of NAFTA, scholars such as Monica Campbell and Tyche Hendricks, Raj Patel, and Rick Relinger estimate, anywhere from 1.3 million to more than 2 million Mexican farmers were forced off their lands, pushing them into urban centers of Mexico and north of the US-Mexico border. Significantly, NAFTA came into effect after a longer period of neoliberal reforms in Mexico during the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration (1988–1994), including policies that abolished price controls for basic staples and broke apart the traditional system of commonly held ejido lands. These policies also reduced the activities of La Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares (The National Company of Popular Subsistence) that as Antonio Yunez-Naude documents, had previously protected small farmers by setting the guaranteed price of corn higher than the international price.

Although the food sovereignty movement has largely developed through the mobilization of rural peasant farmers, agrifood scholars and activists see great potential in furthering the movement in urban contexts. Patel argues that the vision of food sovereignty is “important not only because it has been authored by those most directly hurt by the way contemporary agriculture is set up, but also because it offers a profound agenda for change for everyone” as it “aims to redress the abuse of the powerless by the powerful, wherever in the food system that abuse may happen” (Patel, 2007, p. 302).

Christina Schiavoni agrees with Patel and, observing that the United States does not have the same “peasant base” as many other countries, she finds potential in connecting the framework of food sovereignty to food justice activism that is already happening within urban centers across the country.

Within a framework of food sovereignty, it is of central importance that food sources be consistent with cultural identities, embedded within community networks that promote self-reliance and mutual aid, and that they sustain practices that are connected to place-based heritage cuisines. Food sovereignty also moves beyond questions of access to a more comprehensive focus on entitlements to land, decision making, and control over natural assets. Therefore, food becomes a right, not a commodity to be traded on the open market or dumped on the emergency food system when it is no longer of value for grocery retailers.

See also Food Justice and Sustainable Development.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


TERESA M. MARES

FORAKER ACT. The Foraker Act, sponsored by Senator Joseph B. Foraker (R-OH), was the first organic act passed