

BOOK REVIEW: Spriggs, John and Grant Isaac. *Food Safety and International Competitiveness: The Case of Beef*. Oxon UK: CABI Publishing, 2001, 208 pp., \$75.00. ISBN 0-85199-518-7.

Food safety is an issue intrinsic to agriculture and one that has received increased attention from regulatory, industry, and academic analysts. As the authors point out, new international rules under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO), highly publicized outbreaks of food-borne disease, and the fact that eating is a fundamental part of human life all combine to raise the visibility of food safety concerns for consumers and for national governments. Policy decisions undertaken in response to these concerns have implications for the competitiveness of individual firms and national agricultural industries, particularly in a global environment.

It is the nexus between food safety policies and international competitiveness of the beef industry in four countries (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia) that underlies the discussions in this book. The first two chapters lay the groundwork for comparison of systems among the four countries. Chapter One introduces the idea that a viable food safety system is ultimately a partnership between government and industry, both entities with a vested interest in providing safe food but neither sufficient by itself to ensure success. Nomenclature for systematic analysis of the institutional arrangements governing national food safety systems is also introduced in Chapter One. Spriggs and Isaac distinguish between drivers of change (impetus for change in food safety regulations such as publicized incidents of food-poisoning), meta-rules (relevant government and non-government policies or decision-making processes), and institutional arrangements (structural outcomes, especially formal and informal rules, that arise from drivers of change and meta-rules). Chapter Two provides a discussion of current WTO and Codex provisions related to food safety

regulations as international institutional arrangements.

Chapters Three through Six include detailed descriptions of the drivers of change, meta-rules, and institutional arrangements in each of the four subject countries. The information is detailed and well organized to allow cross-comparisons. At the end of each chapter is a brief section on implications of the identified structure.

Chapters Seven and Eight are the most interesting, and the most thought-provoking, in the book. Spriggs and Isaac define an “optimal” food safety system as one that will maximize the food industry’s long-run international competitiveness, subject to achieving some generally agreed upon, scientifically based minimum standards on food safety. They then offer a number of ways in which countries might move towards this optimal point and judge the food safety systems in the four selected countries against this standard.

There are three explicit objectives listed in the introduction to this book: 1) to describe the major drivers for change in a number of important beef producing countries 2) to describe the institutional arrangements governing food safety internationally and in some important beef producing countries and 3) to discover the ingredients of an optimal food safety system and to evaluate the institutional arrangements in the various countries against this benchmark. The first two objectives are met in some detail for the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The third objective falls short of the mark in defining an “optimal” system, even though the attempt should stimulate continued debate on a topic of critical importance.

The greatest shortcoming of this book is the narrow scope the authors impose in trying

to discuss global food safety and impacts on international competitiveness. A detailed look at the institutional systems of four beef-producing countries is provided as a basis for comparison of regulatory processes. Yet the countries chosen are all very similar by international standards: all are developed countries with relatively advanced food safety systems. Inclusion of developing countries and/or countries dependent on food imports would have allowed a much richer comparison of institutional systems. For example, one would expect *a priori* that such nations might face greater institutional adjustments to comply with WTO provisions.

Although the authors offer a disclaimer in the preface that their intention is to stimulate discussion rather than to persuade readers to agree with their position, a more careful development of the "optimal" food safety system would add credibility to their arguments. The definition used is clearly based on a country that is competitive selling beef in global markets. What would an "optimal" system look like for an import-dependent country, or an import-competing country? Even leaving aside this concern, development of the optimal system seems a bit circular. For example, Australia has developed a system based on co-regulation. Co-regulation includes the government-industry partnerships that are defined as "optimal" thus the Australian system is

deemed the closest to optimal. Much more convincing would have been some statistics, or at least a discussion, documenting how changes in the Australian system have resulted in fewer instances of illness from food-borne contaminants or greater competitiveness without accompanying losses in food safety. Some justification is needed to define the other components of an "optimal" system as well; for example, documentation that a process-based system out-performs a performance-based system based on measurable criteria. The authors discuss the need for cost-benefit comparisons of policy options but fail to offer any information about how to conduct such an analysis consistent with optimal outcomes.

Granted the task of describing implications of food safety regulation on global competitiveness, even within one industry, is huge. This book does a good job defining the interaction between the forces driving food safety concerns and changes in regulatory processes. The amount of detailed information in each of the country chapters illustrates the complexity of food safety regulation. Frustration among firms, governments, and academics trying to work through such complex systems can be readily understood. Spriggs and Isaac make a contribution towards imposing a systematic approach to the effort.

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