Food Safety: Perceived Risk And Public Trust

Remarks by
Carol Tucker Foreman
CSL/JIFSAN Joint Symposium on Risk Analysis
June 13, 2003
CFA Membership, Funding and Policies

- Alliance of more than 300 local, state, and national consumer organizations
- Seniors, farmers, trade unionists, anti-hunger advocates
- Member dues, foundation grants, annual Food Policy Conference and dinner
Perceived Risk & Public Trust

- Nature of risk perception
- U.S. consumers perceived risks from food – GM foods, Food-borne illness
- U.S. food safety risk management/risk communication—
"Some of our greatest pleasures and our greatest fears have to do with what we eat."

Paul Rozin
Food is Special

- Cultural/emotional ties
- Is it safe? Will it harm me and mine?
- Fear of unknown, uncontrollable risks
- Risk Managers, Trust and Confidence
Different Groups Perceive Risk Differently-Slovic

- Gender effects in environmental survey
- White males different from all other groups—perceived risks as smaller
- Conclusion—power, status, alienation, trust strong determinants of risk perception/acceptance
Factors Amplifying Perceived Risk

- New, possibly catastrophic risk emerges
- Risk managers can’t be trusted
- Risk Managers not in control
- Experts don’t understand risks
Factors Diminishing Perceived Risk

- Risk doesn’t spark public concern/dread
- Media reporting limited
- Benefits of hazard are necessary
- Hazards well understood/controlled
- Managers trusted; display control, expertise
Risk Management & Trust—Slovic

- Asymmetry of Trust—easier to destroy than create
- Risk management institutions as sources of risk
  - Human factors
  - Organization factors
  - Faithlessness
How Risk Managers Build Trust

- Perceived as reducing, mitigating, minimizing risk
- Communicate effectively
- Actually reduce risk
U.S. Shoppers Perceptions of Food Related Risks

- Food Marketing Institute (supermarket trade association “Trends” survey of 1000 shoppers, conducted annually 1989-2003
- 1/5 of Americans not confident food is safe
FMI Food Safety Risks 2000-03

- Bacterial contamination---80-83%
- Pesticides—60-65%
- Hormones-40%
- GM foods- 1997—15%
  2003---30%
I am willing to eat foods that have been grown with new biotechnology techniques

Undecided 51%
Agree 26%
Disagree 23%

Consumer Support for Biotech Crops is Decreasing

IFIC Polls for 1999 and 2003

- TOTAL Likely to buy insect protected gm food that uses less pesticides
- POSITIVE effect on decision to purchase if reduced fat oil was made from gm plants
- FEEL that biotechnology will provide benefits within next 5 years

Feb-99: [Bars for each category showing percentage]
Apr-03: [Bars for each category showing percentage]
Why Americans Don’t Like GM Food

- No consumer benefits
- Some Industry arguments for acceptance aren’t persuasive
- Eat this because:
  - Future possible benefits
  - Good for Africa
  - Good for Trade
- Reduce pesticide use—a good argument not emphasized
Industry decisions that diminish public support

- Oppose rigorous food safety regulation
- Oppose Labeling
- Fail to recognize Risks in PMPs
- Transgenic Animals
- Concerns not about science
Products derived from transgenic organisms are regulated according to their attributes and intended use.
Actions that Might Salvage Agricultural Biotechnology’s Future in U.S.

- Support improved risk management
- Don't grow PMP’s in food crops
- Recognize ethical, moral concerns around TG animals
Scientists/Public Perceptions Agree on Food-borne Pathogens Dangers

**CDC estimates:**
- +76 million cases of food-borne disease each year
- +325,000 hospitalizations
- +5,000 deaths

**USDA-ERS estimates:**
- + $7 billion annually in medical costs, lost wages
U.S. Food Borne Illness Risk Management Archaic, Inadequate

- Responsibility spread over 12 agencies
- Governed by dozens of laws
- Resources not allocated according to risk
- Risk Mgmnt at FDA, USDA
USDA INSPECTION SEAL
Messages that undermine public trust in risk managers, risk communication

- Public concerns not “sound science”
- Different perceptions of risk due to public’s ignorance of scientific method
- Blaming the victim
- There is no problem