



LSP Myth Buster #15

An ongoing Land Stewardship Project series on ag myths & ways of deflating them.

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Myth: Organic vegetable production spawns outbreaks of deadly bacteria.

Fact:

When news broke in 2006 that E. coli infections had been linked to raw spinach, some of it coming from certified organic farms, apologists for the conventional food system pounced. Organic vegetable operations can use cattle manure as a natural source of fertility, and E. coli is often present in raw bovine waste. For some commentators, that was enough evidence to indict all organic farms.

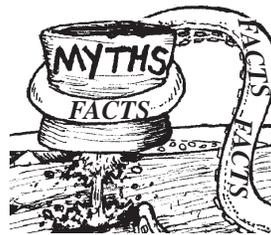
What was lost in the hysteria was an important point: certified organic farmers are prohibited from using raw manure for at least 90 days before harvesting crops grown for human consumption.

One other mostly overlooked factor is the role factory livestock farming plays in the spread of dangerous E. coli bacteria. E. coli exists in the guts of humans and cattle without managing to make us sick, as food writer Nina Planck recently pointed out. In general our stomachs are acidic enough to kill this bacterium. But one strain of this critter, E. coli O157:H7, loves acid, and it's the one that can make us ill, even kill us. The intestinal tracts of cattle that feed on grass and hay don't contain this deadly bacterium. But during the past few decades, cattle have increasingly been raised using intensive grain diets on large-scale factory farms. It turns out grain-based diets create unnaturally acidic stomachs in bovines, providing a perfect environment for O157.

This means that O157 is now an uninvited guest at your supper table, even if only vegetables are on the menu. Liquid manure from factory farms can find its way into waterways, making it possible to contaminate produce operations via irrigation or flooding.

Stack on top of that the fact that our meatpacking industry has managed to loosen regulations and speed up production lines to the point where it's difficult to keep

the manure-laced E. coli that's inside the cattle from getting onto the meat being processed, and you have a recipe for disaster.



Agribusiness and its friends within the government have known how to nip the O157 problem in the bud for some time. Replacing even some of the intensive feeding of grain with more grass and hay could help take care of the problem. And many other human health, as well as environmental, benefits are starting to emerge from forage-based livestock production.

For now, industrialized agriculture's strategy is to feed grain to livestock in large-scale confinement facilities and to manage the problems associated with such a system through Band-Aid solutions such as irradiation.

More information

◆ Nina Planck's commentary on E. coli and spinach is at www.ninaplanck.com/index.php?article=e_coli.

◆ The Multiple Benefits of Agriculture (www.landstewardshipproject.org/programs_mba.html) initiative has fact sheets and research reports on the benefits of grass-based livestock production.

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This Myth Buster is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock. For more information, call 651-653-0618 or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org.