



NY Congressman Jim Walsh: Darling of Agribusiness; Danger to Safe Foods

Summary: With the E. coli contamination of spinach that sent almost 200 people to the hospital in the early fall of this year reminding Americans once again of the potential danger of contamination to our food supply, the current report looks at how New York Congressman James Walsh played the leading role in weakening food safety testing during the last major E. coli outbreak and how Walsh voted again this year to gut food safety. The report also finds that Walsh has received more campaign contributions from agribusiness than any member of the House from the Northeast.

Walsh Tries to Stop Tougher Regulation of Food After E. coli Outbreak

In 1993 more than 700 people were sickened and four children died from an E. coli outbreak tied to contaminated meat at the Jack in the Box fast food chain.¹ As a result, the USDA proposed implementing new food safety regulations. The new system would upgrade the USDA's reliance on visual inspections by setting standards limiting the contamination of raw products by dangerous but invisible microorganisms, and by adding advanced scientific tests and monitoring requirements.

In response to the new USDA proposal, Syracuse Congressman James Walsh, who headed the Subcommittee for Agriculture of the House Appropriations Committee, introduced an amendment to force the USDA to conduct more extensive hearings before the new rule was implemented. At the time, the *Washington Post* reported that an attorney for the National Meat Association was one of the authors of the amendment offered by Walsh. Among the industry objections was the requirement for a new test for salmonella in ground beef.²

According to Michael Taylor, who was the head of the Food Safety Inspection Service of the USDA at the time, Walsh was acting on behalf of the meat industry. "Congressman Walsh from New York who spearheaded the effort said publicly and to us in meetings that the reason this amendment was needed was because the industry, felt its concerns were not being heard clearly enough by me and the Department of Agriculture."³

At the time, the co-founder of Safe Tables, a national organization of victims of food-borne illness, wrote a letter to the *New York Times* (7/8/95) in which she said:

Mr. Walsh will be remembered as the man who pulled the plug on meat inspection reform for the meat lobby. No one has taken the public health crisis of contaminated meat and reduced it so effectively to a partisan food fight as has he. This 11th-hour obstacle to inspection reform was engineered by the National Meat Association,

¹ Politics of Meat, Steve Johnson, Frontline, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/meat/politics

² ibid

³ ibid

while legislative connections to Mr. Walsh were crafted by Kraft (reported in The Washington Post, June 26). Mr. Walsh talks about doing government a new way, while he acts in the manner of old-boy politics: legislators bowing to monied interests. The Department of Agriculture's proposed reforms are not about burdensome, punitive regulations, as the industry and Mr. Walsh would have us believe. They are about using science and setting basic standards of sanitation to save lives. As for allowing industry to regulate itself, Mr. Walsh need look no further than inside America's many filthy meat plants and at the national epidemic of food-borne disease incited by new antibiotic-resistant pathogens to see that this industry is incapable of policing itself.

The public outcry against the Walsh amendment led to a compromise being negotiated and the new regulations were implemented.

Agribusiness Bankrolls Walsh

Why would Walsh act so vigorously to stop more stringent consumer safety protections following national food poisoning that killed four children and sickened hundreds of Americans? In the 1996 election cycle, Walsh received \$65,086 from agribusiness interests, including \$4,786 from the American Meat Council, one of Walsh's top 15 contributors⁴.

In the ensuing decade since Walsh tried to kill a food safety regulation, he has remained the darling of agribusiness. And this year, Walsh and the Republican majority in Congress approved another bill aimed at weakening food safety.

Since 1989, Walsh has collected \$429,339 from agribusiness interests, the most money Walsh has received from PACs in any industry. Walsh has collected more campaign money from agribusiness than any other member of Congress from the Northeast. During that time the American Meat Council has been Walsh's 12th largest campaign contributor, with \$35,586 in contributions. Among the agribusiness PACs that have contributed to Walsh are:

Agribusiness PACs Giving to Walsh ⁵	Campaign Cash to Walsh from 1989 to 1996
Total Agribusiness	\$429,339
Total food processing and sales	\$119,786
Selected Agri and food PACS:	
American Meat Institute	\$35,586
National Meat Association	\$7,000
National Cattleman's Beef Association	\$6,500
Agri Mark (grain marketing)	\$12,750
General Mills	\$15,500
National Turkey Federation	\$6,500
National Chicken Council	\$10,500
National Pork Producers	\$3,000
Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar PAC	\$4,500

⁴ www.opensecrets.org.

⁵ Federal Elections Commission data at www.fec.gov.

Southwest Peanut PAC	\$ 500
Kraft Food	\$4,000

Walsh Votes to Weaken Food Safety in 2006

This year, Walsh voted for legislation, backed by the food industry, that could nullify state laws that lead to tens of thousands of adulterated foods being removed from supermarket shelves.

Virtually the entire agribusiness industry, a coalition of more than 150 companies and associations from Coca Cola to the Vinegar Institute, succeeded this year in winning House approval of the National Uniformity for Food Act. According to the industry coalition, "The Act provides for a single set of national food safety standards and warning requirements for packaged foods." Walsh voted for the Act on March 8, 2006, when the House passed the bill by a vote of 283-139.

The view of the Act from consumer and environmental groups is very different. According to Consumers Union, the non-profit publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine:

The bill is not a simple food-safety uniformity bill, as its proponents claim. Under the guise of national "uniformity," this bill would eliminate critical state laws that protect consumer health while leaving in place an inadequate federal system based on the lowest common denominator of protection. [Emphasis in original.]

As drafted, the bill would wipe out state food safety laws and regulations that are not "identical" to federal law - even in areas where the federal government has not acted. The bill could directly harm consumers by increasing their exposure to food-borne illnesses, undermining the authority of state food safety officers, and overturning state food labeling laws. In order to keep current laws in place, states would be required to go through a new costly, time-consuming, and burdensome regulatory appeals process, which the Congressional Budget Office has estimated would cost the federal government alone more than \$100 million over five years. In the end, the federal government could wind up denying state requests to keep their own laws in place. ...

In 2001 alone, states took action in 45,000 separate instances to remove adulterated foods from the marketplace. H.R. 4167 could nullify the enabling legislation for most of these actions.⁶

The Sierra Club took an equally dim view of legislation:

H.R. 4167, the so-called "National Uniformity for Food Act of 2005, would undermine public health protection by eliminating state food safety and warning label requirements that are critical to protecting the public from food that can cause illness. Food industry lobbyists are trying to railroad this bill, which would more appropriately be labeled the "State Food Safety Preemption Act," through Congress

⁶ Consumers Unions, 2/15/06

even though no Congressional committee has held a single hearing to explore its potential impact. As consumers, we all should have the right to know about health risks, such as mercury in fish or lead in cans.⁷

Conclusion: Walsh Puts Agribusiness Cash Ahead of Consumers and Food Safety

At a time when the serious food poisoning of Americans is again in the national headlines, Syracuse Congressman James Walsh's record of putting the interests of the food and agriculture industry before consumers bears new scrutiny. Walsh has collected more campaign contributions than any member of the House of Representatives from the Northeast. Agribusiness PACs have donated more money to Walsh than any other industry's PACS during his tenure in Congress, more than \$425,000.

Ten years ago – the last time that the nation suffered a high-profile E. coli poisoning – Walsh abused his position as chair of the powerful agriculture subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee in an attempt to block tougher food inspections. This year he voted with the majority in the House, to gut state regulation of food safety.

Clearly, Representative Walsh should come with his own safety label: “Warning: An excess of food industry campaign contributions has led to voting to put food industry profits before consumer health and food safety.”

⁷ <http://www.sierraclub.org/legislativetracker/109HR4167.asp>