Objective(s)

This research addresses the politics and policies around the production and consumption of tomatoes in the United States. In addition, this research examines the influence of tomatoes on the U.S. agricultural and food production systems, working conditions, and overall public health and safety. A large part of this paper will be presenting my research on the national policies that shape the production of tomatoes. Although overlap will inevitably occur, this research compliments and expands the discourse, by supporting research with actual congressional legislation and public policies that gives a political framework to other vital findings. Moreover, I plan to discuss past and current legislation that address the working conditions of tomato farm workers. My goal is to trace the political travels of tomatoes from the farms in Florida to the Capital building in DC.

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Summary of Findings

Introduction

The focus of this paper is to convey the overall effects of politics on tomatoes and how it affects the American diet. Four key inferences trace this topic- (1) production policies (2) food safety legislations (3) worker rights (4) the role of non-profit organization. First is the legislation behind the production of tomatoes. For example, I plan to discuss the current Senate debate that was spurred by a recent outbreak of disease-ridden tomatoes in California and Florida. This led to local legislation that requires minimum food safety standards for producing, harvesting and packing tomatoes. This is just one example of the influence of politics on the production of tomatoes that I hope to convey.

Following this example is the influence and response of nonprofit groups to the production of tomatoes. In addition, the American perception of tomatoes is also important to mention. Meaning, Americans eat tomatoes that fit into their diets (i.e. ketchup, and on hamburgers). Florida farmers growing tomatoes for direct sale need to keep tomatoes firm and marketable. Therefore, they expose them to ethylene gas to keep them red until they reached their destination. A number of political implication traces this method.

All things considered, this paper will report the government’s response to key element within the tomato production and consumption discourse. In essence, my research will address the question – What are our politicians doing to ensure that the tomatoes we eat are safe and come from a place where workers are not being exploited?

Production

In 1994 a federal panel cleared the way for research of the first genetically engineered food. The first commercially grown genetically modified food (GM) was a tomato. Referred to as FlavSavr by Monsanto, this tomato was modified to ripen without softening. According to GMO Compass, a food research organization, this transgenic tomato had a ‘deactivated gene’ that hindered the tomato from creating polygalacturonase, an enzyme involved in food softening. The premise was that tomatoes could be left to ripen on the vine and still have a long shelf life, thus allowing them to develop their full flavor. However, these GM tomatoes did not meet financial expectations. Although the FDA approved them, GM tomatoes with delayed ripening have disappeared from the market after peaking in 1998. At this point, no genetically modified tomatoes are being grown commercially in North America.
So even as early as 1994 when tomatoes accounted for 3-5 billion of the nation’s economy, we see corporation starting to take short cuts for appearance and ultimately profits (Fortin, 2008). The government’s response to genetically mandated food was to mandate labeling and safety standards. The United States derives its power to influence food labeling from the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938. According to the Library of Congress:

“The FDCA and the agency that administers it, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), govern the safety and accurate labeling of a trillion dollars worth of products annually, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs, cosmetics, medical devices, blood and tissue products, and the nation's entire food supply except for meat and poultry” (THOMAS, 1938).

In addition, the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which predates FFDCA, is a set of laws that gave Congress the authority to establish the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). As far as genetically modified foods, in this case tomatoes, in 2002 legislation was introduced by Dennis Kucinich (Ohio), for labeling and safety testing of genetically modified foods. The major mandate of this bill amends the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act to include genetically engineered foods and related materials in the definition of "food additive" and requires that a petition to the Secretary of Health and Human Services for a regulation prescribing the conditions of safe use of a genetically engineered food additive (THOMAS, 2002). This bill was referred to the subcommittee on health was later tabled and never introduced for debate. The above legislation traces the production of tomatoes and gives a greater framework into the politics and policies that follows a tomato as it leaves the farms and enters the American diet.

Recent Outbreaks/Government Response/Food Safety Standards

In the summer of 2008, 145-160 people in sixteen states were confirmed ill from Salmonella ridden tomatoes. Elizabeth Weise of the USA Today writes,

“FDA says the source of the contaminated tomatoes may be limited to a single grower or packer or tomatoes from a specific geographic area. The agency also notes that there are many tomato crops across the country and in foreign countries that are just becoming ready for harvest or will become ready in the coming months” (Weise, 2008).

The tomato industry lost an estimated 100 million from this outbreak. So again the question remains, how did the government respond and what policies they enact to ensure that
future outbreaks are prevented. On a local level, the Florida state senate introduced legislation to ensure that Florida tomatoes are disease free. The bill proposed by Sen. Charlie Dean of Florida required minimum food, safety standards for producing, harvesting, packing and repacking tomatoes. The bill ultimately failed. Nevertheless, this represents government’s reaction to issues that impact tomato production and consumption. At the national scene, in 2009 Rep. Rosa DeLaurin (Connecticut) proposed the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2009. This bill will

“...To establish the Food Safety Administration within the Department of Health and Human Services to protect the public health by preventing food-borne illness, ensuring the safety of food, improving research on contaminants leading to food-borne illness, and improving security of food from intentional contamination, and for other purposes” (Library of Congress, 2009).

In addition, this bill has two major implications. It requires food faculties to evaluate hazards and implement preventative control. Second, it allows inspection of foreign faculties registered to import food. According to Congressional Quarterly, this proposed bill is currently referred to the Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy and Poultry. In sum, the government seems to respond effectively when outbreak arise. Yet, further effort and legislation could be made to reduce red tape and prevent future outbreaks.

Worker Rights

Brian Watson, a local Florida reporter writes, “Farm workers who pick tomatoes are among the most exploited workers in America. He goes on to describe the working conditions of migrant, tomato workers. He states, “Laborers routinely spend 10 or 11 hours in unshaded fields on 95-degree days. They are bent over — picking tomatoes with both hands — and pressured to work without breaks” (Watson, 2009). Without migrant workers, Florida’s tomato industry would collapse. The state exports 1.5 billions pounds of tomatoes a year, about 90 percent of the tomato industry. In essence, exploited farm workers pick the tomatoes we eat at our dinner tables; this fact is often ignored. So again, what is the government doing to prevent this type of exploitation? Recently President Obama vowed his support of Employee Free Choice Act, which will protect a worker’s right to join a union. The bill was introduced by Sen. Kennedy (Massachusetts) and Rep. George Miller (California). According to the Library of Congress, the proposed bill:
“Amend[s] the National Labor Relations Act to establish an efficient system to enable employees to form, join, or assist labor organizations [unions], to provide for mandatory injunctions for unfair labor practices during organizing efforts, and for other purposes” (THOMAS, 2009).

This bill increases penalties on employers who discriminate against workers with union involvement. Employee Free Choice Act is currently being debated in Senate.

Role of non-profit organization

Following the dire conditions of tomato workers and the government’s response to this injustice is the role of non-profit organizations. Since the Employee Free Choice Act has been introduced, individual companies have reached deals with migrant workers. The role of non-profit organizations cannot go unnoticed for pushing this legislation and increasing pressure on both individual companies and the federal government. The main organization that seems to be at the forefront of these issues is the Coalition of Immolate Workers. CIW is a community-based organization whose members are made up of migrant workers. Recently, CIW launched a boycott against Taco Bell, demanding the company to take responsibility for the working conditions of tomato farm workers.

In the end, Taco Bell agreed to the demands of the organization to increase workers wages and implement a monitoring system to avoid worker abuse. CIW have reached similar deals with McDonalds, Burger King, and Subway (Leary, 2005). Without non-profit organization such as the Coalition of Immolate Workers, legislation to improve the working conditions of tomato workers unlikely would be as progressive as it is now.

Conclusion

All things considered, when looking at the political travels of a tomato, it is important to examine all elements of its production and consumption. These factors include the legislation that follow the production of tomatoes, current food safety regulations, the rights of workers, and the important role of non-profit organizations; as well as the government’s response to the above topics. As previously stated, when outbreaks arise or workers rights issues are exposed the government is some what effective in their response and action, yet further measures should be take to prevent both political red tape and worker exploitation. This research set out to examine all of these components and truly trace the travels of a tomato from the farms in Florida, to the Capital Building in Washington D.C., and ultimately into the American diet.
Sources


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