

Proposed Op-Ed Piece Submitted for Publication
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The Facts About Egg Safety in Ohio
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As director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture, I want to assure Ohioans that the eggs they eat each morning for breakfast are among the safest in the nation because of the meticulous safeguards in place through the processing stages on Ohio's farms.

In actuality, the odds of an egg produced in Ohio having *Salmonella enteritidis* is much lower than the one out of 20,000 eggs frequently cited. That number is based on information published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2000 that indicated an estimated national *Salmonella enteritidis* flock prevalence of 35 percent. The prevalence of *Salmonella enteritidis* in Ohio flocks today is nearly 10 times lower than that, which makes the odds of a *Salmonella enteritidis* positive egg in Ohio closer to one out of 200,000.

So, why is the prevalence of *Salmonella enteritidis* in Ohio so much less? The reason is simple. Ohio is a pioneer in egg safety, starting with the Ohio Egg Quality Assurance Program administered by the Ohio Department of Agriculture since 1997. For more than 10 years, nearly 95 percent of eggs produced in Ohio are from flocks enrolled in this program. The producers in this program follow best management practices needed to reduce the occurrence of *Salmonella enteritidis* in a hen's laying environment. The Ohio Department of Agriculture spends a large amount of time auditing records of these facilities, inspecting facilities and testing environmental samples. These efforts have resulted in a significant reduction of *Salmonella enteritidis* in Ohio flocks.

The value of egg quality assurance programs is recognized by human health experts. A report published by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that eggs produced in states with quality assurance guidelines are associated with a decrease in *Salmonella enteritidis* in human foodborne illness. They also concluded that "egg quality assurance programs played a major role in reducing *Salmonella enteritidis* in these states".

Salmonella enteritidis is one of more than 2,000 serotypes of *Salmonella* recognized today. The illnesses caused by these bacteria have multiple sources beyond eggs, including other food items, farm and companion animals, reptiles and, most importantly, human-to-human contact. In the last five years, only two *Salmonella enteritidis* illness outbreaks have occurred in Ohio, with the most significant outbreak taking place in 2006, which was caused by improper sanitation practices among food handlers.

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There is much debate about how different poultry housing systems can affect the incidence of *Salmonella enteritidis*. Studies published are primarily from Europe and provide conflicting results. One recent study from Sweden concluded that laying hens housed in litter-based and free range housing systems were at higher risk of bacterial infectious diseases and cannibalistic behavior compared to laying hens in cages. But these studies are difficult to apply to U.S. production systems today because many European flocks have higher *Salmonella enteritidis* prevalence levels than flocks in the United States. A common conclusion among the United States and European studies is the need for appropriate biosecurity measures and the importance of best management practices, regardless of the housing system.

Ohio's egg producers are proactive leaders in food safety. They have incorporated effective measures to reduce *Salmonella enteritidis* in flocks for more than 10 years. Beginning July 9, 2010, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration will introduce a national, mandatory egg quality program. Because the federal program will have many of the same components as the Ohio Egg Quality Assurance Program, nearly 95 percent of the eggs produced in Ohio will be from producers who already comply with a majority of the mandatory requirements.

Ohio produces more than 7 billion of the nation's table eggs each year. The Ohio Department of Agriculture and Ohio's egg producers take seriously the issue of assuring safe table eggs. Ohio's current practices, in addition to the new FDA-mandated program, will make this safe product even safer.

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