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## Starved for Reform; After mad cow disease, we could learn a few things about food regulation and retailing from Europe.

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Within days of the discovery of mad cow disease in the United States, the Agriculture Department announced measures to keep the disease out of the meat supply. The beef industry, after resisting such measures for years, immediately endorsed them. In an election year and in the face of collapsing export markets, such rapid action should surprise no one. But neither should it stop Americans from asking bigger questions about the safety and quality of their food supply. They would be wise to follow the example of Europeans, who, rather than passively accepting top-down assurances, have exercised increasing influence over both government and food industry policy.

In recent years Europeans' stubborn refusal of such U.S. agricultural products as hormone-treated beef and genetically modified crops has left many Americans puzzled. Sure, we can understand why European farmers want protection against cheap imports. But anyone who has talked to Londoners or Parisians about genetically modified foods will recognize that protectionist sentiments don't begin to explain the depth of popular opposition to foods that Americans eat without a second thought. Some might then argue that the opposition simply reflects age-old European dietary norms, perhaps sharpened with a dash of new-fashioned anti-Americanism.

What this explanation overlooks is how European food attitudes and politics have changed since Britain first acknowledged the public health dangers of mad cow disease in 1996. The French public, for example, cared little either way about genetically modified foods through the mid-1990s; by 1997 it overwhelmingly opposed their production and sale. Britain's mad cow disease crisis, meanwhile, helped provoke far-reaching changes in food regulation and retailing, some more salutary than others.

In Britain and France, the public outcry against government mishandling of mad cow disease and other food-borne dangers led to government shake-ups aimed at making food safety regulation more transparent and less prone to capture by agribusiness interests. In light of the USDA's own failings on this front, some commentators have recommended that the United States create an independent food safety regulatory body, not unlike Britain's 4-year-old Food Standards Agency. It's a good idea, but not enough by itself. The effectiveness of such agencies depends in part on whether they listen to the public, and not just the experts. In recent years, a number of European governments have sponsored citizens' forums on agricultural biotechnology. In 2000 France assembled citizens at the local, regional and national level to discuss "the general state of food."

The crisis also fueled the growth of energetic and broad-based "agro-food" movements across Europe, and especially in Britain. As the media exposed the unsavory government and industry practices that contributed to the disease's spread, people began to pay more attention to once-marginal campaigns for a cleaner and kinder food supply. Soon Britain, long the butt of boiled pea jokes, acquired one of the world's fastest-growing appetites for organic and "fair-trade" foods. Food reformers won the ear not only of top government officials but also food retailers eager to win back public trust. They persuaded the country's top supermarkets to keep their shelves free of genetically modified foods and to cooperate with initiatives to improve international farm labor standards, animal welfare and the retailers' own healthy food offerings.

On a less positive note, the same supermarkets have taken advantage of heightened food safety concerns to consolidate their control over suppliers. They now demand that farmers and processors of all their foodstuffs -- not just beef -- adhere to extremely strict hygiene and "traceability" standards. This means, for example, that African exporters of wintertime green beans must keep records of every plot of beans, from planting through shipment. This protects the supermarkets from liability, but it's burdensome for smaller operations. Consequently, since the mad cow disease crisis, small farmers and processors from Kent to Kenya have lost business with the supermarkets, which now get many of their fresh foods from only a handful of industrial-scale producers.

As Britain's 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak demonstrated, highly concentrated food production is more vulnerable to epidemics, and potentially to agro-terrorism. Moreover, it takes a toll on rural communities. Now that the USDA has called for traceability and other beef industry reforms, it should take care that these reforms do not put otherwise responsible smaller farms and processors out of business. More immediately, these reforms should not lead Americans to forget that mad cow disease's entry into the food supply, here as in Europe, has exposed serious government and industry failings. We should appreciate what Europeans learned from their own mad cow disease crisis and understand their concerns about the food we produce.

The writer is an assistant professor of geography at Dartmouth College and the author of the forthcoming book "French Beans and Food Scares: Culture and Commerce in an Anxious Age." She will answer questions about this piece at 2 p.m. today in a live discussion on [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

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