

Consumer Concerns



Metropolitan consumers in Kansas appear less likely to change their purchasing habits when it comes to foodborne outbreaks, according to a new study from Kansas State University (K-State) department of agricultural economics.

The study, by John (Sean) Fox, professor of agricultural economics, and Alexandra Gregory, doctoral candidate in agricultural economics, polled consumers in two major markets — Los Angeles, Calif., and Wichita, Kan. Consumers in both cities were questioned about their purchasing habits related to potential foodborne illnesses. Survey topics ranged from avian flu in chicken and *E. coli* in spinach to the treatment of food with irradiation and antibiotics in meat.

“What we were trying to do was learn what consumers knew about food safety and determine how that impacted their choices as consumers,” Fox said. “When there is a situation like a food recall — even if it’s a low-risk situation — they tend to get a lot of publicity.”

During fall 2007, the researchers sent surveys to 1,000 people in each city. The survey had a 30% response rate, with more answering from Kansas than from California.

Overall, consumers in Los Angeles seemed to be more likely to react to reports of foodborne contamination.

For example, when asked about *E. coli*-contaminated spinach — a real-life scenario in 2006 — consumers in Los Angeles were more likely to report a change in their purchasing habits than those in Wichita. In Wichita, 55% of people said they didn’t change their spinach purchases following the 2006 *E. coli* scare, compared to a

K-State study finds California consumers appear more likely than Kansans to change purchasing habits in the face of foodborne illness.

by *Katie Mayes*

corresponding 45% in Los Angeles, Fox said.

The surveys also asked about how the respondents’ poultry consumption would change if a case of bird flu were found in a wild bird in Montana. In that case, those in Los Angeles were 20% more likely to eat less chicken than those in Wichita.

“Seventy percent of Wichitans said their consumption wouldn’t change, whereas the corresponding percent for Los Angeles was 50%,” Fox said. Furthermore, 14% of Los Angeles respondents said they would stop consuming poultry altogether, compared to only 7% in Wichita, he said.

While not sure of the reason for this difference, Fox noted that Kansans are typically more familiar with agricultural issues. He also pointed to the lower response rate from the L.A. sample and the possibility that those who did respond may have been more concerned about food safety issues in general. Fox and Gregory are still examining the data for further details.

Consumers were also asked whether they were more or less likely to purchase food that had been irradiated. Irradiation is a method of decontamination in which foods are exposed to ionizing energy similar to X-rays.

The technology has been shown to effectively destroy disease-causing bacteria that might be present in food without affecting the nutritional quality, according to Fox.

Though consumers in both cities were equally knowledgeable about irradiation prior to the survey, when provided with a description of the technology, consumers in Los Angeles were less likely to choose an irradiated food product than consumers in Wichita.

“Almost 40% of respondents had not heard of food irradiation prior to our survey,” Fox said. “People could benefit by knowing more about technologies like food irradiation because it can kill foodborne pathogens on spinach and leafy vegetables, products for which there isn’t a common kill step for the consumer before eating. It can do the same for meat products that pasteurization now does for milk.”

Other survey findings of note include:

- ▶ Wichitans were more likely to lean toward purchasing cheaper meat from animals treated with antibiotics while, even at a significantly higher price, residents of Los Angeles leaned toward the antibiotic-free variety.
- ▶ Wichitans reported eating more beef than those in Los Angeles, though Los Angeles consumers reported eating more vegetables. Chicken consumption was roughly the same.

The study was funded by the Food Safety Consortium, of which K-State is a partner.

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Editor’s Note: *Katie Mayes is a student communications specialist for K-State Research and Extension News, which supplied this article.*