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COMMENTARY

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Food safety (and security) starts at home

As our region recovers from the devastation caused directly or indirectly by Hurricane Isabel, many of us have been forced to confront the fact that much of the food in our refrigerators and freezers is spoiled.

However, as we make the decision about what we can keep and what gets thrown away, this is an excellent time to re-examine the question of the safety of our food supply and what we can do to ensure we practice good food safety whether the weather is good or bad.

The issue of food safety has taken on a new security dimension in the two years since the events of September 11, 2001. As security experts continually remind us terrorists seek not only to destroy human lives, but to ruin the U.S. economy as well.

In the aftermath of the September 11 second anniversary and Isabel, two lessons the Agriculture Department put forth recently for the current National Food Safety Education Month are even more important:

(1) It is imperative that public health officials and food industries associated with agri-

cultural production and food processing work together to help protect our nation's food supply from intentional contamination.

(2) Food service workers and consumers preparing meals in kitchens at restaurants, schools, and homes must do all they can to prevent foodborne illnesses.

Despite the threat of terrorism, the greatest food safety threat to consumers remains the improper handling and storage of food. Each year, millions of illnesses in this country can be traced to foodborne bacteria. While the food supply in the United States is one of the safest in the world, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 76 million Americans get sick, more than 300,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 die each year from foodborne illness.

Consumers can master food safety and avoid related illness with some common-sense kitchen hygiene and a dash of shopping knowhow.

By properly washing hands (before, during and after preparing the meal), food preparation surfaces and cooking utensils, nearly half of all in-

cidents of foodborne illness could be prevented. To avoid cross-contamination of surfaces, cutting boards, dishes, utensils and countertops should be washed with hot soapy water

available standby kills or inactivates disease-causing microorganisms quickly, including E. coli, Salmonella and the norovirus that has recently plagued passengers on cruise ship.

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and then sanitized with a solution of approximately 1 teaspoon of chlorine bleach (plain, unscented) in 1 quart of water.

Cloths and sponges that contact raw foods should be soaked frequently in a solution of 1 cup of chlorine bleach in 1 gallon of water. Chlorine bleach, present in most of America's laundry rooms, can be a reliable, inexpensive ally in the battle to control foodborne disease in kitchens. This readily

Other basic kitchen hygiene practices include refrigerating perishable groceries immediately upon arriving home, cooking at recommended temperatures, and refrigerating leftovers within two hours of eating.

Shoppers who read labels and keep current on food supply warnings also can prevent illness by simply keeping at-risk products out of their homes. The 2002 Farm Bill requires that beef,

lamb, pork, fish, perishable fruits and vegetables and peanuts be clearly labeled so consumers can tell where the food was grown or raised. This information can sometimes enable consumers to avoid at-risk food products publicized by the media or in government warnings. Guatemalan raspberries and Mexican cantaloupes, for example, were recently cited for Cyclospora and Salmonella outbreaks.

Those who have spent the past week without electricity know natural forces can disrupt the food supply as easily as a terrorist attack that seeks to contaminate the food or water supply.

While the government does its part to strengthen homeland security against bioterrorism, consumers should arm themselves with the ability to keep food safe by learning about kitchen hygiene and grocery shopping choices so we are prepared should one of Isabel's cousins visit us in the future.

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