

**Column for Manila Bulletin**  
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## **Of Trees and Forest**

### **A Benchmark for Food Safety**

One of the legislative measures closest to my heart is Senate Bill No. 3311, the proposed Food Safety Act of 2012. This is because it's for the interest of all Filipinos and people of other nationalities who live, work, or spend their vacation in our country.

The bill, which substitutes for four measures authored by Senators Jinggoy Estrada, Miriam Defensor Santiago, Edgardo Angara, and myself, seeks to strengthen the country's food regulatory system to advance consumer health protection.

The Senate Committee on Trade and Commerce, which I chair, recently submitted its report to the chamber seeking urgent action on SB 3311 because food safety is a pressing issue for all of us.

We all know that food is considered one of man's basic needs. We need it to nourish our bodies and to function properly. It is the key to our existence. Thus, we need assurance that what we consume will not cause us harm, regardless of whether food is prepared at home or bought outside.

Food poisoning is a universal problem. Food-borne diseases cause great suffering, and at times, even death. Let me cite some incidents about it as published in newspapers. In La Union, it was reported that at least 50 people, including a newlywed couple, were hospitalized after eating food that was served at a wedding reception in May, 2012; in Bulacan, more than 200 people fell ill after attending a birthday party in June, 2012; and just early last month, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council reported that more than 100 people became sick after eating breakfast following a race. At least 94 of the victims had to be hospitalized for treatment.

Cases of food poisoning are by no means limited to the Philippines. In Sri Lanka, more than 400 people were hospitalized in July this year because of food poisoning. Just a week earlier, more than 100 Sri Lankan soldiers were hospitalized, also because of food poisoning.

Food poisoning is also a problem even in wealthy and developed countries. Last February, health authorities in the United Kingdom launched an investigation following an outbreak of salmonella infection, which downed some 30 people since December, 2011.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified 31 pathogens and unspecified agents responsible for food-borne diseases that send people to hospitals and sometimes lead to death. CDC estimated that every year about one in six Americans (or 48 million people) gets sick from food poisoning, 128,000 are hospitalized because of food-borne diseases, and about 3,000 Americans die of food poisoning.

Another report discussed a study prepared by United States Public Interest Research Group (US PIRG), a consumer group, in which it noted a 44 percent increase in food poisoning reports between January, 2011, and September, 2012, compared to the previous two years.

The report, titled “Total Food Recall: Unsafe Foods Putting American Lives at Risk, also cited 1,753 cases of food-borne illnesses linked to recalled food products within the 21-month timeframe, which caused an economic cost of more than \$227 million.

Based on data gathered from the CDC and other government agencies, the US PIRG said that during the period January, 2011, to September, 2012, recalled and contaminated produce, meat, and other food products resulted in 37 deaths and 464 hospitalizations. And the report described the food safety systems in the US as “broken.”

For us in the Philippines, the last thing we want is a broken food safety system. We can avoid such a dangerous situation with the timely enactment of SB 3311, which lays down a comprehensive framework that sets the benchmark for food safety in various stages – harvesting to manufacturing and including processing, handling, packaging, distribution, marketing, preparation of food, and consumption. (To be continued)

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**LINK:**

<http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/380280/a-benchmark-for-food-safety#.ULMbZ-SsjTo>