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“COOKIE BILL” ENCOURAGES SALES OF UNSAFE FOODS

MADISON – An obscure piece of legislation known as the “Cookie Bill” is drawing some attention from talk radio personalities, opinion writers and even national public interest group Americans for Prosperity. The bill would allow people to produce certain baked goods in their home kitchens, and sell them to the public.

Current Wisconsin law requires anyone producing food for sale to the public to be licensed and inspected by the health department. One industry food safety expert says the licensing process serves a very important purpose.

“We have no problem with Aunt Edna baking cookies and selling them, so long as she does it in a controlled environment that minimizes the risk to the public of foodborne illness,” said Susan Quam, Executive Vice President at the Wisconsin Restaurant Association.

“The home kitchen is the epicenter of family activities, which include pets, children and visitors. For that very reason, it could also become the epicenter of the next *norovirus* outbreak,” Quam said.

Food safety researchers agree that more foodborne illnesses are attributed to food prepared in the home than to all other sources. The vast majority of foodborne illnesses go unreported in the United States, with many people chalking-up their symptoms to the “stomach flu.”

Proponents of the bill have pointed to neighboring states that allow this type of activity, but Quam says that other states have accounted for food safety in ways that the authors of Wisconsin’s “cookie bill” have not.

“Illinois allows the activity, but they also require health inspections. Michigan requires a barrier (such as a door) to keep pets with dirty paws out of the kitchen, but Wisconsin’s bill doesn’t even require that. Minnesota requires food safety certification, so that home bakers at least show they have some knowledge of proper food safety procedures.” According to Quam, the “cookie bill” in Wisconsin falls way short when it comes to simple measures that could protect consumers’ health.

“What’s more,” said Quam, “this bill has many home bakers saying they can’t wait to start selling pies, quick breads and other products that would not even be legal under this bill. One person even testified at a public hearing in the Capitol that her most popular product is her zucchini bread – a *potentially hazardous* item that would still be illegal to produce at home, even if this bill becomes law. The cottage foods industry seems to be taking this bill as a green light to sell everything they want to sell, even products that clearly would not be authorized. A much better education component is clearly needed.”

Media personalities and interest groups outside the food industry have called food safety concerns with the bill a “red herring,” but foodservice professionals take food safety very seriously.

“Food safety is not a ‘red herring’ issue, nor is regulation just there to keep competition out. That is another claim by those who don’t have an understanding of food science.” Quam said. “We have suggested simple changes to this bill that would minimize food safety concerns, and that’s all we’re asking for.”

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Since 1933, the Wisconsin Restaurant Association has been dedicated to the promotion, protection and improvement of the foodservice industry.