

Battered vegetable industry looks to regain public trust

**By Dorsey Griffith, Jim Downing and Matt Weiser – Sacramento Bee Staff Writers
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California's fresh vegetable industry on Tuesday began the daunting work of regaining consumer trust, even as government investigators focused on nine Salinas Valley spinach farms in their search for the source of a highly virulent strain of *E. coli* bacteria, which has sickened 131 people around the country.

One California legislator called for a "produce safety action plan" and regulations to protect consumers against future outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

"The excuse has been we cannot take action until we know the cause," said Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter. "We are going to identify practices that potentially lead to product contamination. We want to assure consumers that California produce will have a much higher standard."

The current contamination has sickened 131 people in 21 states, 66 of whom required hospitalization, an unusually high rate for an *E. coli* outbreak. One woman, from Wisconsin, died. Another 20 have been diagnosed with hemolytic uremic syndrome, which can cause kidney failure. Health investigators believe all the cases involved consumption of contaminated fresh spinach between Aug. 2 and Sept. 9. It can take up to a week to become ill after exposure to the bacteria; testing to confirm the strain can take several days more.

Across the country, store shelves have been emptied of fresh and bagged spinach, two Salinas Valley companies have recalled their produce and health officials have even warned against cooking fresh spinach.

Federal officials are hoping that by Thursday they can rule out spinach-growing areas outside California as potential sources of the outbreak. That would allow those producers to put their fresh spinach back on the market, said Dr. David Acheson, chief medical officer with the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

In the meantime, the investigation continues to focus on Natural Selection Foods LLC, and a handful of farms that grow the spinach that the company processes. Neither the FDA nor the state Department of Health Services would release the names of the farms in question.

"The most likely problem here is probably restricted to a single location on the farm," Acheson said. "Then, subsequently further down the processing, it contaminated larger volumes (of the product)."

About a dozen state and federal investigators are in the Salinas Valley examining everything from use of irrigation water and fertilizers to hygiene practices of the field workers. Investigations of the processing plants, where spinach is washed, packaged and readied for distribution, continues as well.

Some growers are taking matters into their own hands, hiring private laboratories to run tests at their farms.

On Tuesday, in a field east of San Juan Bautista operated by Pride of San Juan Farming, two technicians from Santa Maria-based Primus Labs collected vials of water from wells and irrigation lines, and clipped leaves of spinach and lettuce.

With a GPS-enabled laptop, Miguel Guardado recorded the location of each sample.

The growers "are deciding to do the sampling in all the fields to be sure the product is safe -- and then proceed to harvest," Guardado said.

Amid reports of some growers plowing under their spinach fields and dismissing crews, farmworkers throughout the area were aware of the threat to their jobs.

"It worries me because if the spinach isn't there, there won't be any work," said Alfredo Soto, 25, of Salinas.

Soto, part of a crew weeding a field of romaine lettuce along Highway 101 north of San Juan Bautista, said workers had been instructed to take precautions to prevent contamination.

"We've been told we need to be sure to pick up all our garbage and that we must wash our hands before and after going to the bathroom -- and the bathroom must be clean," he said.

A trailer parked at the edge of the field served as a washroom: two portable toilets and a hand-washing sink that drained into a tank.

The nationwide spinach halt hits an industry that has enjoyed a decadelong boom. In 1996, annual U.S. spinach consumption was a half-pound per person. By 2005, that figure had grown to 2 1/4 pounds.

Industry groups have repeatedly declined to estimate the cost of the recall to growers. Based on 2005 crop production figures, though, it appears Salinas Valley farms yield roughly \$1 million in spinach each day from May through November.

Kathy Means, Produce Marketing Association spokeswoman, said the industry hopes for a quick and definitive conclusion to the investigation.

"We have to find out what is causing this and correct it," Means said. "It's not only the right thing to do -- but (producers) also have a very strong financial interest in restoring consumer confidence."

To do that will require state legislation, said Florez. The state senator cited a year-old letter sent to the California Department of Health Services from the FDA that pressed regulators to lean on growers to address *E. coli* outbreaks. He said what is needed now is a plan to prevent future outbreaks by eliminating potential sources.

At a news conference in Bakersfield, Florez called for a ban on use of reclaimed water -- highly treated wastewater -- and fertilizers made from sewage sludge. And he wants improvements in produce-bagging procedures to prevent bacteria from breeding.

Florez said the state also needs more inspectors sampling produce and monitoring agricultural practices.

"We shouldn't wait until people get sick to figure out that we have an *E. coli* outbreak," he said.

Kevin Reilly, deputy director of prevention services at DHS, acknowledged the state does not routinely inspect produce farms. "Our visits to farms are limited to outbreak investigations of this sort," he said.

Similarly, A.J. Yates, undersecretary of the state Department of Food and Agriculture, said they inspect a product only to ensure it meets market standards.

Reilly acknowledged that even with food safety guidelines for growers and producers, *E. coli* outbreaks have continued to plague consumers for the past 10 years.

"We need to work with the industry and producers to identify if voluntary guidelines are adequate," he said. "There has been progress to date in this industry, but we have a big outbreak. Something broke down."

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