

Distributors eye farming changes  
By Jacob Adelman, staff writer  
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LOS ANGELES - Trying to prevent more E. coli outbreaks and regain consumer confidence, some produce distributors are pressuring farmers to abandon practices that have long been considered environmentally friendly.

Fresh Express, the nation's No. 1 maker of packaged salads, is refusing to buy lettuce and spinach from farmers who don't stop using compost and recycled water.

"If there's a risk there, we don't want to take it," said Jim Lugg, food safety director of Fresh Express, a division of Chiquita Brands LLC.

Other shippers and handlers want farmers to stop planting native grasses that limit erosion but can attract animals and trap disease-causing bacteria.

Farmers complain that they are being subjected to requirements based more on conjecture than sound science, and that the mandates could undo years of work aimed at making farming less disruptive to the environment.

"There's been some real knee-jerk decisions made in the industry," said Dirk Giannini, who operates a lettuce farm in the agriculture-rich Salinas Valley. "We may overreact, and that might shortfall the environment."

The California agriculture industry, which produces about three-quarters of the nation's lettuce and spinach, is working to regain the trust of consumers after two E. coli outbreaks last year were traced back to the state.

One incident in September left three people dead and sickened more than 200 others. The contamination was tracked to a spinach field in San Benito County.

Food and Drug Administration officials said lettuce grown in the Central Valley was the likely source of an E. coli outbreak in December that sickened about 80 customers at Taco John's restaurants in Minnesota and Iowa. The source of lettuce blamed for 70 cases linked to Taco Bell restaurants on the East Coast remained unknown.

Not all distributors are adopting the stringent policies regarding farm practices.

Will Daniels, food safety chief for Natural Selections LLC, which also distributes packaged produce, said there wasn't enough evidence linking compost use and non-crop growth on farms to the spread of E. coli.

"It's difficult to put blanket statements out there to say, 'There will be no use of grass for erosion control,'" he said.

Industry groups and government officials in California have launched several initiatives aimed at protecting crops against E. coli and other contamination.

Distributors have until April 1 to sign a statewide self-regulating agreement coordinated by the Western Growers Association, which represents the fresh produce industry in California and Arizona.

The most recent draft of the plan would prohibit deals with farmers who use raw manure as fertilizer and allow livestock near crops, among other practices.

Farmer George Fontes said companies have already stopped buying lettuce grown on his Salinas farm using compost that sometimes contains manure.

"There's no real proven connection between contamination and compost," he said.

Fontes believes that using compost instead of chemical nutrients is better for the long-term health of his fields. Fertilizer can harm nearby waterways because runoff contains nitrogen and other elements that promote algae growth and decrease oxygen, killing fish, he said.

The healthier soil fostered by compost also attracts fewer insects, reducing the need for insecticides that can seep into groundwater, Fontes said.

Lugg said Fresh Express does not buy from farmers who use compost because of concerns that it could contain manure infested with disease-causing bacteria.

The company also refuses to buy from farmers who collect and reuse excess irrigation water because of worries that it could spread bacteria among crops. he said.

Giannini defended his use of reclaimed water, saying it's safe if tested each time it's cycled among crops. In addition, the practice requires less energy than pumping fresh water from wells and keeps farmers from depleting Salinas Valley groundwater, he said.

"It would be hard to say the valley can survive with well water only," he said.

Many farmers along the Central Coast planted native grasses as part of a water quality plan they were required to develop and follow by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Now, they are getting a strong message from distributors that "any kind of vegetation or wildlife around your crops is a food safety risk," said Alison Jones, an environmental scientist with the board.

Diana Stuart is studying the conflicts between food safety and environmental protection as part of her doctoral studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

She has found no conclusive research showing that tilling with compost or planting grass strips along waterways can spread disease-causing bacteria.

"Everyone basically agrees there's a lack of good science, but they think they have to do everything possible to restore consumer trust, so there's this need to move immediately," Stuart said. #

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