

Mystery grips Salinas

FARMING VALLEY: EVERYONE HAS A THEORY AS AREA BRACES FOR LOSSES, MORE SCRUTINY

September 22, 2006

By Patrick May, Mercury News

SALINAS - Most September afternoons, this valley is powdered pink by a day's worth of dust hanging in the air above the fields. Kicked up by tractor and truck, the faint cloud of soil billows up from America's richest vegetable fields, then clings to everything and everyone it touches, from landowner to seed salesman to field hand.

As autumn approaches, the air over the so-called Salad Bowl of the World is thick with more than just dust. As investigators return to the valley to look into the latest in a 10-year string of *E. coli* outbreaks, and as more lawsuits blossom and rumors swirl, a forensic whodunit has gripped this angst-filled farming community. And it is forcing food producers to re-examine their entire process, tracing a path from the seed in the ground to the salad on the table.

This time the assailant is spinach, with one death and 146 people sickened in 23 states after eating contaminated produce traced back to Salinas. But the mystery goes much deeper than the recent headlines, with this valley implicated in eight of 19 previous outbreaks of potentially deadly *E. coli* O157:H7 since 1995, most involving lettuce.

What's gone wrong in the Salinas Valley? Are the bacteria coming from cutting knives tainted by bad soil? From wells? Cow pastures upwind? Or processing centers where lettuce and spinach are bagged? From the growers rethinking the way they plant, fertilize, water and harvest their crops, to the scientist-sleuths at the highest level of government, everyone is stumped.

"I don't think it's realistic to expect that we'll identify a single cause," said Jack Guzewich with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "I think it'll be a combination of things. But finding a proverbial smoking gun? I'd be surprised."

Economic fallout

Like the valley dust, life here seems suspended in mid-air, and Salinas has become a community afraid of its own shadow.

"Everybody realizes this won't blow over quickly and could hurt us over the long term," said Red Spence, a forklift operator at a Salinas produce-cooling facility. "Already people have lost work; it's just a few hours or a few days so far. But people here are anticipating the potential loss of jobs."

Everyone has a theory on the guilty party -- from processing methods to laborers not washing their hands. This past week, investigators fanned out across the Salinas fields, suspecting, as the FDA's David Acheson said, "the most likely source of contamination initially is on the farm somewhere."

Indeed, at an August conference looking into lettuce-borne outbreaks, "the consensus was that the culprit was farming, either water, workers' hygiene, flooding or animal contamination," said one shipper who attended the session but was afraid to have his name used because he's involved in litigation over a previous outbreak. "I said, guys, bagged vegetables seem to be the common denominator in all these outbreaks, but they didn't want to hear it. There's been flooding for 150 years into these farms, so what's new here? Putting lettuce into plastic bags."

In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has credited the boom in spinach and lettuce sales to the advent in the early 1990s of pre-washed greens in sealed bags. California farmers sold \$258 million of spinach last year alone, a huge jump from the \$56 million sold in 1995, begging the question: Does the bagging trend that helped save this industry now threaten its existence? The question has yet to be answered, and so far federal health officials have limited the most recent warning to spinach only.

But there's no shortage of suspicion -- over the use of well water, over reclaimed water used for irrigation, even over flooding of the Santa Rita Creek into the Chinn Ranch, fields northwest of Salinas that were implicated in an earlier lettuce-related outbreak and that now grow produce not consumed by humans -- pumpkins -- instead of leafy greens.

For each suspected cause, there's a counterargument. When state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Bakersfield, this week proposed restricting the use of reclaimed water on crops, Monterey County Farm Bureau head Bob Perkins said the suggestion was absurd.

Recycled water, he said, "is a way to stretch the valley's water supply, and it's as safe as drinking water. Reclaimed water is a non-issue."

Growers say they're constantly fine-tuning the way they prepare the soil, irrigate, fertilize and harvest. Vegetable farmer John Baillie says increased use of third-party auditors is crucial to stopping cross-contamination before it's too late.

"We do soil samples, tissue samples, samples of leaves," Baillie says. "We're not just throwing seed in the ground and watering it. We're monitoring everything we do."

Baillie says he even washes his farm machinery "as I move from one ranch to the next to make sure I'm not taking weeds from one area into another."

The industry follows its own guidelines, called "Good Agricultural Practices," which include this section on "Guiding Principles for Crop Production Water":

"Identify potential sources of contamination that affect your water, especially those that are within your ability to control in a manner that will protect its quality."

Despite such voluntary guidelines, though, contamination of a crop from a neighboring cow pasture, for instance, seems a reasonable possibility when one takes a drive along Metz Road between Soledad and King City. Along this winding two-lane road, cattle graze just uphill from farms, and ditches take potentially manure-tainted rainwater through culverts directly into fields full of lettuce.

Salinas grower Dale Huss says cattle near growing fields is a fact of farming life. "But before we jump to conclusions, we need to look to science to find out what happened."

Reality check

Scientists are also looking at the next stage: harvesting. Are workers failing to follow proper hygiene practices? Do occasional government inspections guarantee, for example, that iceberg lettuce isn't tainted by a dirty knife the moment it's snatched from the ground? As a lettuce crop outside town was being harvested this week, some of the practices appeared looser than industry guidelines perhaps intended.

For example, as foreman Octavio Felix watched his crew of 36 laborers use sharp knives to cut iceberg heads from their roots, passing them on to a conveyor belt where, in this case, they're immediately bagged in plastic for delivery to the store. He said workers were free to go to the portable toilets anytime they wished and that liquid sanitizer was nearby so they could wash their knives from time to time. The toilets were spartan, though not especially dirty, and there was soap available to wash up.

"We don't make them wear hair nets, but gloves, yes," said Felix, admitting that their knives sometimes do come into contact with soil -- "The knife can touch the dirt when you're first learning how to cut," he said. "But as you get better at it, it doesn't happen."

From the field, the greens are delivered by truck in large plastic or cardboard bins, either to a nearby processing plant where the leaves are turned into bagged spinach, lettuce or other salad mixes, or to a cooling facility. Either way, this stretch of the journey involves dramatically less human contact with the greens than in the fields. Forklift driver Spence at the cooling plant points to boxes of greens being loaded into a "cooling tube" for 26 minutes and brought down to 32.5 degrees before they're stored temporarily in the "cold room." From there, the sealed boxes go into refrigerator trucks for transport to processing plants around the United States. Spence has his own theory about things.

"The only two places the contamination could have happened," he says, "are the processing plant and the field. Those are the only places where the vegetables could come into contact with either humans or animals or water. Not here at the cooler or in the trucks that bring it here and take it away. Nobody opens these boxes, and nobody touches the produce."

The processing plants, where greens from various farm fields are brought together to be sorted, cleaned in three separate chlorinated baths, dried, and sealed in plastic bags, are considered by some to be a possible source of contamination for several reasons: Most of the outbreaks have involved bagged produce; and the introduction of bagging technology in the early 1990s coincides with the start of the *E. coli* crisis.

Packaging scrutinized

Critics suggest that a tainted lettuce plant could contaminate other produce once it's all mixed together in the washing bins. But packagers stand by their methods, insisting the process is safe as they monitor everything from pH levels to temperature to employee hygiene. But Bill Marler, the Seattle attorney who has filed nearly 40 consumer lawsuits over the contaminated greens, thinks bagging the leaves may actually create a huge risk for an industry that doesn't want to hear it.

"They make so much money from packaging -- it's a \$3- to \$4-billion business annually just in packaged lettuce," Marler says. "But maybe the ultimate problem will be the way they process massive amounts of lettuce all commingled, vs. buying a head of lettuce that you wash and use to make your own damn salad."