

Posted on Wed, Sep. 20, 2006

SPINACH CONTAMINATION
Officials comb Salinas farms
FDA: SOURCE MAY NEVER BE FOUND

By Mary Anne Ostrom, Ken McLaughlin and Barbara Feder Ostrov
Mercury News

As the number of victims climbed, health officials and farmers on Tuesday blamed each other for the years of failure to figure out how to stop *E. coli* outbreaks linked to Salinas Valley lettuce and, more recently, spinach.

But, in good news for spinach lovers, Food and Drug Administration officials said they may soon be able to recommend that eating the leafy vegetable grown elsewhere in the country is OK.

Federal and state investigators said they are looking at farming practices at nine farms in or near the Salinas Valley after packaging codes led them to deduce the nationwide *E. coli* outbreak could have come from spinach harvested there a few weeks ago.

“The goal in the next 24 to 48 hours is to try to limit this down to a specific growing region in California and then try to find a mechanism, working with industry, to see if we can get spinach from other areas of the country that are clearly not implicated in the outbreak back on the market in a safe way,” David Acheson of the FDA’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition said.

They fanned out as another FDA official blamed Salinas Valley farmers for not moving fast enough to solve the pattern of *E. coli* outbreaks stretching back a decade.

Robert Brackett, director of the agency’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Sciences who last year warned Salinas Valley farmers to improve their farming practices told the Associated Press on Tuesday that he has a similar message for them now even if the exact source of the latest outbreak cannot be pinpointed.

“What we would like them to do is take ownership of the problem,” he said. “The fact that this keeps coming up suggests that whatever has been done is not good enough.”

“We really look to the FDA for some help in solving this,” Bob Perkins, head of the Monterey County Farm Bureau, said. “The farm community is doing everything we know to do to protect food safety. And they welcome any further ideas, steps to take.”

Reclaimed water

Speculation grew Tuesday about the use of reclaimed water, which is treated sewage water, to irrigate many crops in the Salinas Valley. State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Bakersfield, who represents farmers in the Fresno area, called for new statewide laws governing crop and packaging production. The former chair of the Assembly’s Agriculture Committee, Florez plans to introduce legislation when the Legislature

reconvenes in December to ban the use of reclaimed water in organic crops grown in soil and possibly expand it to non-organic crops.

“The bottom line is why, if you've been working on this for four years, there's been nothing forthcoming,” Florez said. “We really don't know the cause. What we're trying to do is take things off the table that potentially could lead to contamination.”

Salinas Valley leaders reacted angrily to the proposal.

“That's crazy, a knee-jerk reaction that has no bearing in science,” charged U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Salinas.

The reclaimed water is thoroughly tested, Farr said.

On Tuesday, the number of patients sickened increased from 114 to 131 nationwide, with 66 requiring hospitalization. Twenty have contracted a type of kidney failure called hemolytic-uremic syndrome, caused when red blood cells are destroyed. It can lead to permanent kidney damage, and even death. One death has been attributed to the outbreak.

A dozen state and federal investigators began examining the farming practices at the nine farms over the past day.

They were looking for evidence of past flooding or cases where contaminated surface areas had come into contact with crops, FDA officials said. In addition, they will examine animal fecal matter and check whether conditions inside the processing plants are sanitary.

“It's a multifaceted look at what's going on at the farm,” said Acheson, who acknowledged there is a possibility no definitive answer will be found.

Last year, about 16,000 acres of spinach was grown in Salinas Valley, where there have been eight *E. coli* outbreaks related to leafy vegetables. Authorities would not identify the nine farms they are investigating in this latest case.

University of California-Davis scientist Dean Cliver suspects that irrigation water, perhaps drawn from a contaminated well, is the problem.

It is unlikely this water came from rivers and streams, because farmers recognize the risk that this surface water might be contaminated by runoff manure from upstream pastures.

Instead, produce farmers in the Salinas Valley draw their irrigation water from wells, which are fed from deep underground by a large aquifer, said Cliver, professor of food safety.

Aquifers are usually clean. But it is possible for surface microbes like *E. coli* to percolate through porous soils or gravel, until they hit impenetrable rock. From there, they join the vast aquifer.

Irrigation cannot be chlorinated, like drinking water, for environmental reasons.

Recycled water in the northern Salinas Valley is routinely used on 12,000 acres of crops such as artichokes, lettuce, spinach and strawberries. But water officials in Monterey County and groups representing farmers said they doubted whether the reclaimed water could be the culprit.

"This water is clean," said Keith Israel, general manager of the Monterey Regional Water Pollution Control Agency. "You can't drink it, but you can put it in a lake where people swim."

The FDA's Acheson also said even if the FDA says later this week that spinach grown elsewhere is all right to consume, it could be a long time before Salinas Valley spinach is given the green light.

Lessons learned

If no specific cause is found, "we will have to resort to look at what we have learned from this outbreak, require a tightening of good practices or some other regulatory approach, in which case we would need to do that before we allow spinach back on the market. But we're not there yet," he said.

Andy Cummin, whose family owns MetzFresh of King City, said his spinach fields remain unharvested and he believes the industry has come along way in adopting safer farming methods.

"Every year the technology gets better. The outbreaks are magnified because you have a greater ability at this point to trace back a problem," he said, adding new government regulations aren't the incentive to improve techniques but rather saving a livelihood is what's driving healthier farming. "It's a business-economics issues," he said.

Mercury News Staff Writer Lisa Krieger contributed to this report. Contact Mary Anne Ostrom at mostrom@mercurynews.com or (415) 477-3794.

The Mercury News is pleased to let readers post comments about an article at the end of the article. Please increase the credibility of your post by including your full name and city when commenting.