

## **San Benito County ranch source of tainted spinach**

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By George Raine - San Francisco Chronicle

The probable source of September's deadly E. coli outbreak in spinach was a San Benito County cattle ranch that leases land to farmers, state and federal officials said Friday.

Officials said they had isolated the E. coli on the 50-acre Paicines Ranch, which raises grass-fed cattle and leases portions of its land to farmers. The bacterium was found in the vicinity of land leased to Mission Organics of Salinas, which was growing spinach in rows, according to the final report by the California Department of Health Services and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Three people died and more than 200 became ill after eating contaminated spinach in the outbreak. The incident prompted grocers nationwide to remove spinach and other leafy greens from store shelves.

Investigators said they found E. coli "indistinguishable from the outbreak strain" in river water, cattle feces and wild pig feces on the Paicines Ranch, "the closest of which was just under one mile from the spinach field." They said they were unable identify the exact source of the bacterium, but found evidence of wild pigs in and around the cattle pastures as well as in parts of the ranch where crops were grown.

Representatives of Mission Organics and Paicines Ranch could not be reached for immediate comment Friday morning.

The ranch said on its Web site, "We are saddened by the results of the recent outbreak of E. coli found in spinach. It has been reported that Paicines Ranch is under investigation. This is not true. The Paicines Ranch is not under investigation by any government agency. We lease row crop land to farmers. If you want to know whether a particular farmer is under investigation, you should ask them. Since we neither farm nor process row crops of any kind, we are unable to comment further."

The report concluded that "potential environmental risk factors" for E. coli contamination include the presence of wild pigs in and around spinach fields and the proximity of irrigation wells used for ready-to-eat produce to surface waterways exposed to feces from cattle and wildlife.

As a result of the outbreak, California growers are in the process of defining a set of best agricultural practices. Farmers growing and handling leafy green vegetables who follow the practices will earn seal of approval. The guidelines may be finalized as soon as next week.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, has criticized such voluntary self-policing and has introduced legislation he says will better protect the food supply.