

## **Farmers take steps to grow public trust**

Following 2006 disaster, food is closely tested

BY DEBORAH SCHOCH

CHCF Center for Health Reporting

Daily News, 11/26/11

SALINAS — Five years after their healthy-looking green fields became the epicenter of a national food disaster, farmers in the Salinas Valley are still working to regain something even the most bountiful harvest can't ensure: the public's trust.

They are doing their best to rebound after investigators linked spinach grown and bagged here to a deadly E. coli strain that would kill three people, sicken 206 more and shake the nation's faith in California leafy greens. So far, they have succeeded in avoiding another major outbreak.

Yet memories of that turbulent autumn resurfaced after the recent deaths of 29 people from listeria tainted Colorado cantaloupe. And the impact of the 2006 outbreak in the nation's salad bowl — famous for its spinach, romaine and spring mix— shapes the farmers' actions every day.

Retooling the industry

Salinas Valley growers and processors have retooled nearly every step in their industry — from planting seedlings to harvesting and washing greens. They have rallied to create a state-industry pact on how to protect 14 types of leafy greens that is being held up as a national model.

"It was the watershed moment for the produce industry," said Joe Pezzini, chief operating officer of Ocean Mist Farms in Castroville.

Some farmers have shut down in response to the gamut of new regulations, and revenues from spinach have not returned to pre-2006 levels. Last year, Monterey County produced spinach worth \$127.5 million, down from \$188.2 million in 2005, according to reports from the county agricultural commissioner's office.

Adding to the pressure, the nation's major food and retail chains, from McDonald's to Walmart, want proof that their lettuce is as clean as any natural product can be.

That means no cattle grazing uphill from a spinach farm, no roaming wild pigs, no farm crews without hairnets or gloves, no missing reports.

Some food chains even send inspectors unannounced.

"They'll be the Toyota Camry with the Hertz sticker on the edge of the field, looking with binoculars," said Mike Dobler, 50, a third generation grower who works with his family on a large-scale vegetable farm based in Watsonville.

"They're looking to see if you're doing what you say you're doing," Dobler said. Before September 2006, he said, "we were taken at our word, and nobody asked."

The new rules and other safety steps have been credited with reducing the number and size of valley-related contamination problems. Yet recalls still happen. This year, California companies were involved in at least five of eight recalls of leafy greens posted on the website of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, all prompted by federal or state testing. No illnesses were reported by FDA officials.

As recently as Nov. 17, some bagged salads were recalled after a USDA test found E. coli on a sample of lettuce packed for Irwindale-based Ready Pac Foods. Regulators could not immediately say where the lettuce was grown.

Some growers wondered during the 2006 outbreak if the industry could ever rebound.

National television reporters sent to Salinas announced the latest E. coli casualty counts in front of a giant sign of Popeye poised to eat his can of spinach.

The tainted spinach was grown for Salinas-based Mission Organics and processed by Natural Selection Foods, a company also known as Earthbound Farm that has a large facility in San Juan Bautista. There, the baby spinach was washed and bagged for Dole Foods.

Investigators never determined exactly how the E. coli tainted the spinach. They did track E. coli samples from bagged spinach in victims' homes to a field at the Paicines Ranch in San Benito County. Cattle and roaming wild pigs were found nearby.

No large-scale outbreaks

Since 2006, problems have been much smaller and less frequent, said officials at the FDA and the California Department of Public Health.

"We're not seeing these largescale outbreaks," said Patrick Kennelly, the department's chief of food safety.

Even so, leafy greens continue to pose unique safety challenges, experts said.

They grow close to the ground, collecting dirt. They are too fragile to undergo the rigorous cleaning used on hardier vegetables and fruits. And consumers hungry for fresh salads don't want boiled greens.

"Remember, it's a ready-to-eat food. We don't cook it. We don't can it. There's no 'kill' step that's going to reduce the number of microorganisms on it," said Robert Gravani, a Cornell University professor of food science.

Colby Rubbo, 28, starts her days before dawn, climbing into her white Ford F-150 pickup and heading out to patrol the fields of her family's farm in Soledad.

She is one of a new generation of food safety inspectors, with a degree in agricultural business and crop science, steeped in the new safety regimen.

"Agriculture looked at what happened and learned from it," she said.

No earrings in the lettuce

On a typical day, she takes samples of irrigation water. She stops to talk to farm crew supervisors and inspect paperwork. She checks to make sure that field workers have pulled on hairnets and gloves — and that they're not wearing jewelry or rhinestone studded jeans. "We don't want an earring in the lettuce," she said.

For Rubbo and others in the leafy greens industry, perhaps the most significant step in food safety came in 2007 with the crafting of the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, a voluntary pact combining stricter farming practices with government audits. It now covers more than 100 firms handling 99 percent of the state's leafy greens.

Officials at Earthbound Farm, one of the companies linked to the tainted spinach, say they're doing much more than the 2007 pact requires.

The pact focuses on tests and surveys in the fields, said Will Daniels, the company's vice president for food safety. Today, not only does the firm do field testing, it continues testing as greens arrive at the processing facility and again after they're washed and about to be bagged.

Some safety advocates criticize the pact as industry-driven. They want a science-based government entity to develop safety standards. "The truth is, we're still having outbreaks. Listeria is finding its way onto leafy greens," said Elisa Odabashian, who oversees food and product safety campaigns for Consumers Union.

Colorado's cantaloupe recall spread to 20 states and was responsible for more deaths from listeria than any outbreak since 1985. Investigators attributed that outbreak to problems in the packing area, including standing water and a lack of cleanliness.

Some experts hold out hope that a scientific breakthrough will help cleanse leafy greens even more thoroughly.

"That's the holy grail — can you kill the contaminant on the leaf?" said Jim Brennan, president of NewLeaf Food Safety Solutions, a subsidiary of Salinas-based Taylor Farms, which has developed a formula to make chlorinated water more effective at washing greens before they're bagged.

Some growers simply have bowed out.

"It was just more regulations. More inspections. More paperwork. More filings. More fees," said Chris Bunn, part of a four-generation Salinas Valley farming family. Now in his 60s, he quit two years after the 2006 outbreak.

"I miss it terribly," Bunn said. "It was a wonderful business."

*Deborah Schoch is a senior writer at the California HealthCare Foundation Center for Health Reporting. Contact her at [mdschoch@usc.edu](mailto:mdschoch@usc.edu). This story is the result of a partnership between the Bay Area News Group and the California HealthCare Foundation Center for Health Reporting. The center is an independent news organization devoted to reporting about health care issues that concern Californians. It is based at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism and funded by the nonprofit, nonpartisan California HealthCare Foundation.*