

## **Food safety gets new federal scrutiny**

Public hearing set for Oakland in wake of E. coli outbreaks

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By Deb Kollars – Sacramento Bee

National alarm over whether it's safe to eat lettuce and spinach has grown so great that federal officials have set a public hearing Tuesday in Oakland to map out the government's response.

The Food and Drug Administration - responsible for making sure the nation's fresh fruits and vegetables are safe to eat - has come under fire in recent months after three back-to-back E. coli outbreaks last fall and winter sickened 350 people and killed three.

The outbreaks were traced to California's Salinas Valley - one to bagged spinach, two to lettuce. A report on the spinach outbreak in September is expected to be released soon by the FDA and California's Department of Health Services.

Dr. Kevin Reilly, deputy director of prevention services for the state Department of Health Services, said this is the first time the two agencies have worked together on such a large investigation.

"The outbreaks were so big and so widespread," Reilly said, that the two agencies decided to investigate together.

While that report is being finalized, Tuesday's hearing will be the first of two scheduled by the FDA at which federal officials are bound to get an earful of public concerns about their food safety monitoring efforts.

"This hearing is a big deal," said Elisa Odabashian, director of the West Coast office of Consumers Union, the nonprofit publisher of Consumer Reports. "The FDA knows they need to do something."

According to the FDA, outbreaks of foodborne illness in the United States tied to fresh fruits and vegetables have been rising both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of reported outbreaks. Illness from leafy greens such as spinach and lettuce have been especially numerous; between 1996 and 2006, there have been 24 of the outbreaks, FDA figures show.

The most recent cases of contaminations shook consumers, causing many to stop buying fresh bagged spinach and lettuce. And they led to calls by consumer groups and politicians for greater government oversight of the industry.

Currently, the produce industry is not regulated or monitored for safety by government agencies, unlike the meat, egg, milk and processed food industries.

On Monday, the FDA released new guidelines - seven years in the making - to food processors for reducing the risk of food poisoning in fresh-cut produce such as bagged spinach.

The guidelines are nonbinding, which outraged consumer groups and politicians.

"This is too little too late," Odabashian said, noting she plans at Tuesday's hearing to urge the FDA to shift gears and begin an effective regulatory program. "The voluntary route doesn't work and has been deadly."

The hearing will run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building in Oakland.

At the hearing, the FDA will listen to testimony and ask questions but not take action, said FDA spokesman Michael Herndon.

The second hearing is scheduled for April 13 in College Park, Md.

The hearings could lead to a departure from the agency's current hands-off approach to fresh produce.

In the meantime, the state Department of Food and Agriculture, which has no regulatory authority over fresh produce production, is moving forward with a voluntary Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement.

It would set up a new inspection program - designed and directed mostly by industry members - under the state's auspices. Produce that meets the new standards would bear a seal of approval.