

Growers taking heed

Farms evaluate safety after E.coli scare

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More than a month after a deadly E. coli strain in spinach claimed the lives of three people and sickened close to 200 others across the nation, Ventura County farmers are taking stock of their own food safety measures as the produce industry tries to rebound from its losses.

At Boskovich Farms, one of the largest spinach growers in the county, the leafy greens are back in production at the Oxnard facility. Boskovich, which grows spinach on about 1,000 acres in the county every year, stopped spinach production until the U.S. Food and Drug Administration lifted the alert Sept. 29.

"Food safety is always a concern, and we have had an extensive food safety program for some time now," said Lindsay Martinez, Boskovich Farms director of marketing. "However, our program is always evolving as new technologies are available to the industry."

Investigators with the FDA pinpointed the origin of the E. coli O157:H7 to cattle feces found in four ranches in Monterey and San Benito counties. But investigators still do not know how the feces could have contaminated the spinach. They also do not know if the ranch used manure from the cattle to fertilize its fields. There is no evidence that livestock entered the spinach fields on the ranch. However, wild pigs roamed the property, they said.

There is no known method to kill E. coli except cooking fresh spinach at 160 degrees Fahrenheit for 15 seconds, according to the FDA Web site.

Rob Roy, president and general counsel of the Ventura County Agricultural Association, said contamination from steer manure isn't a concern in the county since most local cattle ranches aren't near any irrigation water or farmland areas.

"We are on top of this situation, and we are working closely with local water agencies to do ongoing testing with regards to E. coli and making sure no harmful bacteria is in the water supply," Roy said.

Retired soil scientist Frank Pecarich of Ventura said he was not too surprised when he heard the suspect packages of spinach came from Monterey County farms.

Pecarich, a former soil scientist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, worked on an extensive study called "Soil Survey for Monterey County." He said salt water intrusion and the overuse of aquifers reduced the supply of fresh water. In a controversial move, officials in the area approved the Castroville Sea Water Intrusion Project, which brought treated sewage effluent to irrigate 12,000 acres of vegetables, including produce such as lettuce and spinach.

Pecarich said spinach and lettuce are particularly vulnerable to the E. coli strain because of their soft cellular tissue and because they are typically consumed raw.

Roy said that since the news of the E. coli contamination, local farmers have reinforced their food safety guidelines and have discussed quality-control issues with all employees, from the packing facilities to the fieldworkers.

At Boskovich Farms, it was business as usual for the Food Safety and Quality team Wednesday. Wearing blue hairnets, gloves and overcoats, the team of 12 full-time quality assurance personnel checked chlorine levels in water used to wash shredded cabbage, spinach, green onions and salad mixes in the processing facility in Oxnard. The team checks chlorine levels every hour, said Alex Reyna-Benraadt, director of Food Safety and Quality.

Martinez said Boskovich Farms has always followed state guidelines and maintains a log when fertilizers are applied and which supplier provided them. The company also uses pest control advisers who are certified and licensed by the state. Like many farming companies in the county, Boskovich also has a trace back program, which allows it to track processed products through the harvest date, harvest crew, planting and cooling information and find which ranch the produce came from.

Nevertheless, the company immediately stopped selling spinach products when news of the outbreak hit Sept. 14.

"The long-term impacts will not be known for quite some time and largely depends on consumer confidence and buying habits," Martinez said.

"Boskovich Farms Inc. assumes a proactive role in ensuring the safety of all products sold to our customers. Our primary purpose is to ensure our products are safe and the highest quality."

The E. coli scare with spinach has also helped reinforce the importance of ongoing safety training for all employees.

Ralph De Leon, president of SAMCO, said that after the spinach E. coli outbreak hit the news, managers met with employees during their weekly meeting to discuss everything from keeping clothes clean to personal hygiene.

SAMCO, which has offices in Santa Paula and Yuma, Ariz., grows citrus and avocados in Santa Paula, Fillmore, Ventura and Camarillo.

"The buck stops here," De Leon said.

"The growers are responsible until they find out exactly where the E. coli came from. But we go beyond that and educate the workers as much as possible about cleanliness and contamination. Every time we see something like this, we look in our own industry to make sure we are doing everything to protect the consumer."

— The Associated Press contributed to this report.