# Food Safety Alert – 1/03/07

The *Monterey County Herald* is reporting this morning that a grand jury has weighed in on how the county can help prevent further E. coli outbreaks. The grand jury wants increased funding for the county health department's Consumer Health Protection Services Division. The increased funding would be used to monitor irrigation water, ag land prone to flooding and produce that is susceptible to contamination before harvesting. However, the Food and Drug Administration and the California Department of Health Services are the ones that handle most of the tasks the grand jury recommended. The County's health department only plays an assistance role. They are hoping to fill in some of the gaps in the state and federal government's responsibilities. "'It's quite clear who is responsible for what,' said County Administrative Officer Lew Bauman. 'The question is that as federal and state agencies get clarity on the potential sources of contamination, that the appropriate agencies and industries can develop more definite programs to ensure preventative measures are in place.'"

A tour of Santa Rita Creek by federal, state and local officials found the land near its bed littered with cans, tires, bed frames and mattresses, according to the article. Fecal matter was also present. The Consumer Health Protection Services Division was asked to do testing of several area creeks and it has been found that certain creek junction tend to be places were fecal runoff occur. Once it gets into the waterways, however, it falls under the jurisdiction of the Monterey County Water Resources Agency.

Here is the link to their website story on this topic:

http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/news/16367935.htm

Here is the link to the grand jury report:

http://www.monterey.courts.ca.gov/grand_jury.html

The *New York Times* is running an article title, "When Bad Things Come From 'Good' Food. It suggests that Americans tend to see food contamination as something that happens with meat, poultry or eggs. However, more and more recently the trend is away from those food stuffs to leafy greens and other produce. The article claims that the known outbreaks are just the tip of the iceberg and that close to 76 million people each year contract some sort of food poisoning. It contends that these recent outbreaks are a step backward for public health – while I contend it is just better tracking and more reporting by those who become ill. The article also talks about how the O157 strain of E. coli is harmless to cattle, yet virulent in humans. Feeding cattle with grain, rather than hay, seems to promote the growth of the bacteria.

Water is talked about as a source of contamination as well as wildlife. Most believe contamination occurs on the tops of crops, yet evidence suggests that it can actually be taken up in the root system of a particular commodity. One thing is certain: it is difficult to wash off. Centralized processing, bagged produce and the public eating more raw vegetables than in the past are also being blamed for the outbreaks. "Dr. David W. K. Acheson, chief medical officer at the center for food safety and applied nutrition at the F.D.A., said the agency was trying to find ways to prevent outbreaks. But, Dr. Acheson said, it has nowhere near the resources to inspect the hundreds of thousands of facilities that handle fresh produce in the United States. The Agriculture Department has far more inspectors and is required by law to have one in every major meat processing plant." Science also plays a major role in preventing further outbreaks and there are not many answers. "'We know that 0157 is a natural contaminant of cow feces,' Dr. Acheson said. 'Cow feces, if it gets on fresh produce, is not good. Should there be some limitation as to how close cattle should be to a leafy-greens field? Fifty feet, 5 miles, 50 miles? What's the science? Fifty feet may be plenty if the cows are downhill and downstream of the farm, he said — but if it's the other way around, five miles may not be enough.'" Irradiation is also being looked at by the FDA. "'People in the agency are looking at the impact of that,' Dr. Acheson said. 'There are two pieces: does it work, and what dose do you need? Then, what's the impact of that dose on the quality of the product? You could irradiate anything and sterilize it, but you may end up with mush. It's not quite that easy.'"

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/02/health/nutrition/02seco.html?_r=1&oref=slogin