

Food Safety Alert – 1/08/07

An article by InsideBayArea.com argues for more teeth in the food safety plans the industry and government are putting forth. As we know, Western Growers has set plans to deal with voluntary participation in a marketing agreement between shippers and packers to affix a seal that would assure the consuming public that good or best agricultural practices have been followed. The article says that does not go far enough – that growers and harvesters should also be included. It claims that the marketing agreement falls short of implementing “enhanced mandatory food safety processes on all aspects of growing, packing, and shipping spinach and leafy greens.” The article does acknowledge a second program being developed by the industry that would be mandatory. InsideBayArea.com would like to see more oversight, checking and verification of food safety. The teeth they argue, would be mandatory standards on growing and handling with oversight and enforcement mechanisms.

http://www.insidebayarea.com/argus/oped/ci_4962389

The *Salinas Californian* reported on Saturday that state lawmakers have begun 2007 with a range of views on how to tackle food safety issues. Sen. Dean Florez (D-Shafter), who chairs the Senate Governmental Organization Committee, said he will introduce legislation that enacts food safety rules for leafy green by the end of January. “It’s clear there is a market failure here,’ Florez said. ‘Government needs to step in in these cases ... when industries do not step in to police themselves.’” He wants to determine if industry plans can be incorporated into his legislation. Anna Caballero (D-Salinas) has indicated she will introduce a bill based upon the industry plans, according to the article. “I’ve been working with the agricultural industry, and they are looking at self-regulation, and I’d like to introduce a bill that would set up the guidelines for the regulation,’ Caballero said.” Sam Farr (D-Carmel) has introduced legislation requesting the federal government provide more research funding for food safety research. Caballero supports this bill. Sen. Abel Maldonado (R-Santa Maria), chair of the Senate Agricultural Committee, says before passing any legislation, he would prefer to see the industry’s plan to establish new rules and oversight under existing law. He believes the legislature can always move forward on a bill after seeing if the industry plan will work.

The article also discusses the Western Growers marketing agreement and the marketing agreement hearing scheduled for Jan. 12 at the Monterey County Fairgrounds. “The ‘best practices’ are still being developed through reviews by agricultural and academic experts and are expected to focus on topics such as water, WGA spokesman Tim Chelling said.” Chelling believes a grower would be “crazy to ignore” an agreement or order because that grower would not find a market for their crops. Florez wants certification like beef, dairy and cheese are done.

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2007701060332>

According to an article in the *Mercury News*, the industry plans are already drawing critics. Some believe the “seal of approval” relies too much on the industry policing itself. The article also reports that “an outspoken state legislator is expected to unveil his own plan for increasing the state’s role in setting safety standards and enforcing compliance.” “No one wants to play games with food safety,” said Tim Chelling of the Western Growers Association, a leading sponsor of the plan. ‘The industry has invited government to come in and regulate it.’” Some local growers and distributors have already independently stepped up to the plate and implemented their own procedures for food safety. The article then discusses the marketing agreement in brief detail. Consumer advocates feel that the specifics of the plan will determine whether or not it will be effective. “It’s all going to depend on how strong the underlying standards are,” said Caroline Smith DeWaal, food-safety director at the non-profit Center for Science in the Public Interest. Her group recently petitioned California’s Department of Health Services to develop its own produce safety rules and assume responsibility for enforcement.” The health department currently enforces food safety in processing plants, but has little authority over growing and harvesting practices. The article concludes with legislative action on the horizon by Sen. Dean Florez. His comments can be found in the *Californian* article above.

<http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/16408822.htm>