

Food Safety Alert – 1/15/07

The *Salinas Californian* is reporting that over 200 people attended the Marketing Agreement hearing at the Monterey County Fairgrounds on Friday morning. The CDFA held the public hearing. Growers, produce companies, trade groups, consumer advocate groups, governmental agencies, conservationists and the public all had their say. The meeting was to determine whether or not the agreement should be approved. Public comment by letter or email will be extended until January 19. Growers and industry groups came out in strong support while consumer advocacy and conservation groups voiced their concerns that it is not the right means to the end. Even one state legislator said it isn't strict enough "to ensure true food safety." The agreement would require growers of leafy greens to test soil and water more frequently. Handlers must maintain their own traceback systems and would be restricted to doing business only with growers that pass inspections of their operations. Those handlers that sign on as signatories and meet these rules would receive a seal confirming good agricultural practices were used. The seals are meant to boost consumer confidence in the purchases of leafy green commodities. "Doug Mosebar, president of the California Farm Bureau, which represents 33,000 growers and more than 350 commodities, said all California growers have a responsibility to ensure safe food and a safe food supply. Mosebar said the agreement would move the industry closer to that goal by providing governmental oversight of how leafy greens are handled." However, "Sen. Dean Florez, D-Bakersfield, said he and others in the state Legislature remain skeptical that an agreement written by industry groups, largely governed by a board composed of those same industry groups, can improve food safety in a self-policing manner, under which past outbreaks have occurred." He plans to introduce legislation by the end of the month that would require all growers to increase water testing, including surface water, as well as increased fines for non-compliance and possible quarantines of fresh produce. Teamsters members said it doesn't go far enough because it doesn't address workers' responsibilities. Consumer advocates said the rules have not been made public and would be finalized behind closed doors. Growers and industry leaders believe those that don't follow the regulations would be shunned in the marketplace. A decision could come as early as January 20.

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070113/NEWS01/701130319>

The *San Jose Mercury* also reported on the Marketing Agreement hearing. "The new standards ultimately could cost consumers 'a few cents more,' acknowledged Tom Nassif, president of the Western Growers Association, during a hearing Friday in Monterey convened by the state Department of Food and Agriculture. But he said recent outbreaks of food-borne illness have been a harsh reminder that public health is 'our No. 1 priority.'" The plans critics, which include small farmers, small organic growers, agricultural workers and environmental agencies said the agreement relies too much on the industry policing itself and should not move forward without their input. Approval of the Marketing Agreement is likely because the majority of the industry appears to embrace it. Many believe if it is passed that it could be in place before the spring harvest. "Backers of the plan said the rules are being developed with input from health officials and scientists, although some critics complained they have not been widely available to the public." Some were optimistic, yet cautious. "King City grower Bob Martin agreed that the industry should move forward with urgency. At the same time, he noted that even with new procedures, current technology provides no absolute guarantees against contamination from pathogens that are carried by water and animals."

<http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/local/16452912.htm>

The *Monterey County Herald* report can be found with this link:

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/news/local/16452796.htm>

According to the FDA website, the agency and state health departments of California, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin are closer to determining source of E. coli outbreak at Taco John's restaurants in Iowa and Minnesota. Two environmental samples taken from dairy farms near a lettuce growing area in the Central Valley have tested positive for the strain of O157H:7. The investigation is ongoing, including taking additional samples and to determine if and how material from the dairies may have contaminated the lettuce fields. The FDA says this outbreak is not associated with any other outbreaks and they have no indication any current lettuce on the market is tainted. Epidemiological studies conducted by Minnesota

and Iowa officials had previously identified shredded iceberg lettuce as the probable source of illness at the Taco John's restaurants. Traceback records from the lettuce processor allowed the FDA to narrow the search to specific growing regions. They still cannot link the dairies with the nearby lettuce area. However, the recent outbreaks have led the FDA to consider new regulations to reduce the risk of contamination. The outbreak led to 81 illnesses. Twenty-six were hospitalized and two suffer from HUS.

<http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2007/NEW01546.html>