

Food Safety Alert – 1/16/07

The *Monterey County Herald* has posted an article from the *Los Angeles Times* on its website stating that the E. coli outbreaks from Taco John's and Taco Bell have been traced to prepackaged iceberg lettuce from California. (I reported yesterday on the traceback efforts of the FDA narrowing its investigation to the Central Valley on the Taco John's outbreak – yet the FDA website makes no mention of the source or location of the outbreak from Taco Bell). This article claims that Taco Bell's lettuce was traced back to the Central Valley, even though no sources have been identified. Taco John's produce was traced back to both the Central Valley and to an area south of Salinas. The article points to the proximity of cattle and farming operations as one likely problem. Two "environmental samples" taken from standing water at a dairy in the Central Valley were adjacent to one of the chain's lettuce growers. This news comes on the heels of the Marketing Agreement hearing in Monterey where measures have been proposed to ensure the safety of our food and bolster consumer confidence. The three recent outbreaks have all run their course, but questions remain as to why they are occurring with more frequency and in relative short spans of time. "Tim Chelling, spokesman for the Western Growers Association, said one possibility is increased vigilance by public health authorities, enabling outbreaks to be detected faster and with more precision." Both Taco Bell and Taco John's have switched produce suppliers in the wake of the outbreaks.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/news/state/16452819.htm>

KFSN-TV in Fresno is reporting that Fresno County has been ruled out as a possible source of the E. coli outbreak associated with Taco John's restaurants. The FDA has indicated that the source was in the Central Valley of California. "The FDA says the strain of e.Coli that sickened so many in the Midwest matches the same strain found on two farms near a lettuce growing operation in the Central Valley. Dr. David Acheson, Food and Drug Administration, says, 'One of the common denominators that is coming out with these outbreaks is that the original contamination occurs at the farm level.'" Acheson also believes that modern DNA testing using fingerprinting allows them to link cases together when they weren't able to do that previously. Lettuce currently on supermarket shelves is being grown in the Imperial Valley and in Arizona.

<http://abclocal.go.com/kfsn/story?section=local&id=4927116>

On the University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy website, they are stating that the "environmental samples" that tested positive for E. coli O157:H7 on a dairy farm in the Central Valley came from standing water on the dairy. The FDA has not reached any conclusions about the source of the E. coli in the samples. FDA spokesperson Kimberly Rawlings said the dairy farms are "in close proximity" to the lettuce fields. However, she declined to give any details about their exact location. The FDA is still trying to determine if and how E. coli from the dairy may have contaminated the lettuce. Traceback records obtained from the lettuce processor have enabled the FDA to narrow their search. Rawlings said, "The recent DNA match provides a clue as to one possible source of the contamination for the lettuce, although others may exist. It has yet to be determined how the *E. coli* contaminated the lettuce."

<http://www.cidrap.umn.edu/cidrap/content/fs/food-disease/news/jan1207ecoli.html>

The *Salinas Californian* ran an article yesterday stating that the California Strawberry Commission will host a California Strawberry Food Safety Summit in Monterey on February 6. The meeting will run from 11:30 a.m. until 3 p.m. at the Monterey Conference Center on 1 Portola Plaza. The education summit will bring members of the industry together with prominent experts and regulators. Local, state and federal government members have been invited to the event along with farm bureaus and agricultural commission offices. You can email Peggy Dillon at pdillon@calstrawberry.org for more information.