

Food Safety Alert – 1/17/07

Neal K. Van Alfen, dean of the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at UC Davis, has an article in the *Salinas Californian* in which he presses for more food safety research funding. Currently, a team of UC scientists are working with the USDA in the Salinas Valley to research possible connections between area wildlife and produce contamination. The results may lead to sweeping changes in how produce is grown and handled. Van Alfen states, “on a visit to Salinas, I met with agricultural producers to learn what research is needed. I was impressed with their concern for and commitment to providing consumers with safe, wholesome products.” Public funding, however, has stagnated in the area of food and agricultural research since the 70s. “UC Davis is committed to conducting research that will sustain a safe food supply. Working together, the food industry, university researchers and the regulatory community are making progress to strengthen safety practices, but the process must be one of ongoing improvement to respond to future challenges. Reinvigorated federal and state support for universities is essential to improving methods that ensure safe food from the farm to your dinner table.”

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2007701170338>

An editorial in the *Californian* says that the Marketing Agreement is a step in the right direction. While the agreement may not represent “the definitive answer to food safety,” it is a work in progress the editorial says. It is progress toward putting rules into play that may revive consumer confidence in the produce industry. “It’s apparent that the produce industry will not avoid stepped up government oversight. The increasing number of cases of E. coli outbreaks linked to fresh produce in the past few years demands scrutiny far and above any self-policing the industry can provide. The state Department of Food and Agriculture as well as the state Legislature are conducting the research necessary to add to the safety standards.” The editorial writer urges us to look at it like a test run for improved standards in food safety. As long as it can be tweaked or revised, it should go a long way toward bettering management practices and consumer confidence.

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2007701170337>

The *Western Farm Press* is running an article that discusses the shift of farming operations from California coastal valleys to the desert valleys in Southern California and Arizona and the possibilities of another E. coli outbreak. Normally, the article states, concerns would be on prices and a smooth transition from summer growing to winter growing. This year, E. coli is now a major concern. Those farming in the desert have taken on added precautions. Water safeguards have been added according to Jorge Fonseca, University of Arizona vegetable specialist. While the majority of those that farm in Yuma also farm in Salinas, there are some big difference in the production practices. Plus, time in on there side. According to the FDA, 80 percent of all outbreaks occur between August and November. However, desert growers are taking no chances. Since water for use in irrigation and packinghouses can be a vehicle for contamination, two labs have been set up to check the water at a microbial level. “Growers here do not anticipate a problem, and they want to play it safe to make sure there is no problem,” said Fonseca, who has visited the Salinas area where the E. coli O157 problem is believed to have originated, and has detailed some significant differences which or may or may not preclude E. coli O157 from becoming a problem in the winter vegetable producing areas.” Some things they have going for them in the desert valleys to prevent E. coli contamination include the fact that there are fewer wild animals there, vapam is not widely used down there, they use phosphoric acid down there, the water source is different, they have lower levels of Nitrogen in the soil, the soil is 20 degrees cooler than it is in Salinas, less humidity there, and final irrigation occurs closer to harvest there. All of these things can have a significant impact on the ability of the bacteria to grow.

<http://westernfarmpress.com/news/011607-ecoli-vegetables/>

The *San Jose Mercury News* is reporting that surface water tested near some San Joaquin County farms have very high levels of E. coli. Tests have been conducted since 2004 and the levels have contamination have remained consistently high. Many of these waterways drain into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. As a result, high levels of E. coli have been found in some delta waterways. The majority of the bacteria found are not the sub-type O157:H7. The state goal is to average no more than 126 organisms per 100-millileter sample in the delta’s recreational waters. Since testing began in 2004,

tests of surface water near farms, not the recreational water levels, have exceeded 1,600 organisms per 100-milliliter sample.

http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/breaking_news/16474272.htm

The *Monterey County Herald* is running an article today that says New Jersey has implemented new food safety rules. The regulations include new hand-washing requirements and restrictions on touch raw food with bare hands. "Consumers will enjoy better protection because these rules reflect better scientific understanding of how to prevent food-borne illnesses," said state Health and Senior Services Commissioner Fred M. Jacobs." The new rules will impact 50,000 food stores, banquet halls, caterers and restaurants. The regulations are effective immediately. Bare-hand contact with food has been banned and hand-washing instructions to employees have changed. Hands must now be rubbed vigorously together for at least 10 seconds making sure the undersides of fingernails have been paid close attention to. Those that handle raw ingredients and prepare food must now pass a food safety examination by a nationally accredited program. While the rules are effective immediately, health inspectors are being asked to take a more educating approach at first to allow ample time for compliance.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/16473429.htm>