

Food Safety Alert – 1/22/07

On the News Rx website, Taco John's is reporting that it has received back initial results of independent testing following the outbreak of *E. coli* in Iowa and Minnesota. The audit concludes that the outbreak was isolated between November 28 and December 6. "Taco John's also reported that Kirk Smith, supervisor of food-borne disease investigations at the Minnesota Department of Health, in a *Minneapolis Star Tribune* story, said, 'Right now, our epidemiological evidence points to lettuce as the most likely source for the *E. coli*, but we are continuing to investigate and to work with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and Iowa officials to determine a source more exactly.'" Taco John's plans to continue working with County, state, and federal health departments to determine the cause of the illnesses and make sure there is no recurrence.

<http://www.newsrx.com/articles/438607.html>

The *Los Angeles Times* is reporting that mixing greens (for ready-to-eat packaging) during processing may assist in the spread of *E. coli* contamination. Dr. David W.K. Acheson, chief medical officer at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, says, "If you have a single head of [tainted] lettuce that winds up in someone's home, makes the family sick, chances are it'll never get on the radar screen. If you take the same lettuce, process it ... one head may contaminate multiple bags. Then you've got an outbreak." The article says the pre-washed, packaged produce 3-billion a year industry that was created to improve both safety and convenience is now under a cloud.

Iceberg lettuce meant for packaging is susceptible to contamination because it is cut and initially processed in the fields. "When you've chopped that product, you've created a lot more avenues for bacteria to enter, especially if you're doing it in the fields," said Bob Martin, general manager of Rio Farms in King City. Once the bacterium "is locked into that cut edge of lettuce, then it's really difficult for your chlorine bath to kill it." Jim Gorny, senior vice president for food safety and technology at United Fresh Produce Association, disagrees. Gorny believes that by discarding the core and outer leaves in the field you actually bring a safer product into processing plants. Marty Ordman, a spokesman for Dole, says tests have shown no problems with coring lettuce in the field. "It's the whole process — from the lettuce being planted, to the management of the field, the water that's used, your harvesting practices, making sure the product is kept at the appropriate temperature," Ordman said. "Everyone is reviewing, from A to Z, every process." "Samantha Cabaluna, a spokeswoman for Natural Selection Foods based in San Juan Bautista, Calif., which processed the tainted spinach for Dole, agreed with Acheson that the processing of fresh greens permits tainted produce to be distributed over a wider geographical area." Christine Bruhn, director of the Center for Consumer Research at UC Davis, says buying bagged is actually safer because many of us do not triple wash our lettuce in chlorinated water at home. "Do they scrub the sink with cleanser and then sanitize it with a bleach solution before they start their washing?" she asked. "Do they thoroughly wash their hands with a brush, getting under their fingernails and using a clean towel to dry?"

Many believe the outbreaks are being caught sooner and traced with more accuracy. It is easier to trace brand names and lot numbers than single heads of lettuce.

<http://ktla.trb.com/news/la-me-ecoli20jan20.0.5916229.story?coll=ktla-news-1>

A link to the same article in the Salinas Californian:

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070122/NEWS01/701220303>