

Food Safety Alert – 1/26/07

In article in the *Monterey County Herald* sheds more light on the fight that may ensue regarding the Marketing Agreement proposed by the Western Growers Association and endorsed by the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Small farmers and organic farmers have stepped up in their opposition of the plan. CDFA spokesman Steve Lyle has said that they will certify the plan if enough handlers and shippers endorse it by February 5. There is no set number of companies that must sign on before it is certified by the agency. (Steve Lyle has simply said that a significant number of the 135 companies that handle and ship in the state will need to become signatories for it to be certified).

While the apparent majority will endorse it, some produce companies feel the Marketing Agreement does not go far enough. "It quite frankly needs to be done on a federal level and on a mandatory level because that's what the public needs to hear," said Steve Dickstein, a spokesman for Irwindale-based Ready Pac Produce." The United Fresh Produce Association has already asked the FDA to implement federal produce handling standards.

Small and organic farmers are concerned that it could be too costly to implement, thus putting them at a market disadvantage. They are also leery of signing an agreement where some provisions will not be defined until after the deadline. "Part of the problem is that the practices that would be part of the agreement aren't defined," Malone said. "You don't know what you'd be agreeing to. The suspicion is that for small farmers, the burden is going to be pretty high."

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/16551104.htm>

Here's the link for an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that closely mirrors the above story:

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/01/26/BUGGRNPAA41.DTL&hw=coli&sn=004&sc=935>

The *Salinas Californian* is reporting a turnout of 100 people at the 27th Annual Ecological Farming Conference. A panel of experts, according to the article, says that strengthening regulations for produce growers and handlers will not completely resolve food safety problems. Panelists believe that more research is required to gain a bigger understanding of how produce becomes contaminated by bacteria and pathogens. Produce companies should also re-evaluate their own food safety, they said. The moderator was Mark Lipson of the Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz. Panelists included Chuck Benbrook, chief scientist with The Organic Center in Oregon; Trevor Suslow, a research scientist at University of California, Davis; and Will Daniels, director of quality assurance for Earthbound Farm, the world's largest grower and processor of organic produce.

Benbrook says protecting produce from pathogens goes beyond just growers and processors. "Produce and dairy industries must work together to develop ways to more safely co-exist. Cows shed more E. coli when under high-stress conditions such as crowded feedlots and grain-heavy diets, he said, and many cattle operations exist near waterways or are surrounded by produce fields." He further believes the Marketing Agreement should include testing of water E. coli O157:H7 and acknowledges that E. coli comes primarily from cattle.

Questions remain about how E. coli is spread and much of the research relied upon for food-safety rules are greater than 20 years old. "Despite the rules and more random audits of processing facilities, produce and testing processes, he said, the risk of contamination still exists at all farms, large and small."

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070126/NEWS01/701260334>