

Food Safety Alert – 1/31/07

The *USA Today* is reporting that sales of packaged spinach are down 37 percent from the same period last year. Based on numbers for the week that ended December 23, bulk spinach numbers were down 22 percent. The data is being reported from market researcher The Perishable Group. Sales of packaged salads that include spinach are also hurting. Those numbers are down 28 percent. Meanwhile, packaged salads that do not include spinach were down only 7.9 percent. "It's still devastating," says Jerry Rava of King City, Calif. Rava is one of the nation's biggest spinach growers. He's cut production about 25% from last year." During the outbreak, spinach sales virtually disappeared. Even McDonald's has not returned spinach to its spring mix salad.

"That created a very sensitive market," says Tanios Viviani, president of Fresh Express, the leading packaged salad maker. He says Fresh Express' unit sales of spinach, even this month, are 10% to 15% below last year's levels." Costco returned spinach to its shelves just this month. They now require suppliers to do random testing of spinach for O157:H7 and salmonella at processing plants. Costco also expects to begin testing other ready-to-eat packaged products within the next few weeks. "Fresh Express and others are evaluating testing. Because random tests can miss contaminants, Viviani says grower prevention is the best safety measure. The United Fresh Produce Association has asked for federal oversight of the produce industry. Now, the FDA regulates processing plants but only gives growers guidelines."

http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/food/2007-01-29-spinach-usat_x.htm

Mary Ann Graff, president of the California Women for Agriculture has written an editorial for the *Salinas Californian*. She begins by taking us back to the E. coli outbreak in spinach last September. From there she says that the incident has shown us that we must continually review and update GAPs. She believes that the Marketing Agreement is a good first step, but cautions that we must continue to work on researching the causes of the outbreaks so that our understanding can lead to greater food safety in the future. "It is critical that the entire food industry and regulators work together on a reasoned and scientifically-based assessment of produce food safety that encompasses all aspects of the food chain from farm to consumer. Equally important is that the food safety that begins on the farm must extend to all links in the supply chain. Retailers, food service, and regulators must all be held accountable and responsible for improved food-safety protocols and regulations, she says." She also believes research must encompass the routes of infection, the sources of contamination and the ability of E. coli to sustain itself in the environment.

<http://www.thecalifornian.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070131/OPINION/701310329>