

# Food Safety Alert – 10/23/06

The number of confirmed E. Coli illnesses attributed to spinach grew by two this weekend. Two more Illinois cases of E Coli have been traced to spinach, as officials got test results matching the 0157:H7 strain.

[http://www.suburbanchicagonews.com/couriernews/news/104133,3\\_1\\_EL20\\_A4SPINACH\\_S1.article](http://www.suburbanchicagonews.com/couriernews/news/104133,3_1_EL20_A4SPINACH_S1.article)

*USA Today* is running an article today concerning Fresh Express and its commitment to food safety, which includes payrolling a consultant for food safety (Michael Osterholm, U. of Minnesota expert on infectious diseases and public health), requiring growers to complete a 5 page questionnaire that details everything from the water used to irrigate crops to how growers keep birds off fields to whether worker toilets are cleaned by growers or service companies, to swabbing down cleaned and disinfected harvesting equipment. However, the article also mentioned that such safety procedures have cause Fresh Express to sell their bagged salads on average 10% higher prices than competitors, however, with a 40% market share in bagged salads, it doesn't seem to be hurting.

[http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/food/2006-10-22-fresh-express-usat\\_x.htm?csp=34](http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/food/2006-10-22-fresh-express-usat_x.htm?csp=34)

On Sunday, the *Monterey County Herald* ran an article detailing fencing plans which several growers along the Salinas River are contemplating and the potential conflicts with wildlife and the natural resources in the river channel area. The article discusses the regulatory concerns: First, county building permits are needed for fences more than 6 feet high, and industry officials say fences up to 8 feet high made of tough "hog wire" would be needed to keep feral pigs and deer out of fields, second, putting up fences with minimal impact to fields, farm roads and irrigation systems may require taking out river channel vegetation. And that would require permission from state wildlife officials. "That's loss of habitat," said Terry Palmisano, senior wildlife biologist for the state Department of Fish and Game in Monterey. Depending on how much vegetation would be lost, crop-protection fencing may trigger a formal environmental review and require a streambed alteration permit, she said.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/news/15821578.htm>

On Friday, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on the characteristics of the particular strain of E. Coli involved in this outbreak, a single subtype labeled EXHX01.0124. Disease detectives first booked No. 0124 into the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's genetic fingerprint computer in Atlanta in December 1998, when it turned up in three cases in Massachusetts. It popped up again in 2000, causing a single illness in Kansas. Then the rap sheet for 0124 began to grow -- from five states in 2001 to 20 states last year. Before a single case of spinach-related illness was logged in 2006, there were already 34 cases in 17 states -- all of them caused by the same rogue strain. It is unlikely that scientists will ever discover how the 0124 strain arrived in the Salinas Valley, but the record shows in retrospect that it had been silently spreading throughout the country for at least eight years. The 0124 subtype accounts for less than 1 percent of the strains reported each year, but it has been increasingly prevalent, said Dr. Peter Gerner-Smidt, who tracks the subtypes of E. coli at the Centers for Disease Control as chief of a unique surveillance program known as PulseNet.

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/10/20/BAG4PLT1OE1.DTL>

The "Well Fed Network" published an article attempting to detail the benefits of grass-fed cattle in relation to food pathogens, however, in light of the fact that the samples of manure which tested positive for the lethal strain were taken from a pasture, it should be taken with a grain of salt. The article notes, when an animal is grain fed, either organic or commercial, the stomach acids in the cattle strengthen. Michael Pollen, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* makes it clear: "The recent strain of E. Coli 0157:H7 is believed to have evolved in the gut of feedlot cattle. These are animals that stand around in their manure all day long, eating a diet of grain that happens to turn a cow's rumen into an ideal habitat for E. coli 0157:H7. (The bug can't survive long in cattle living on grass.) Industrial animal agriculture produces more than a billion tons of manure every year, manure that, besides being full of nasty microbes like E. coli 0157:H7 (not to mention high concentrations of the pharmaceuticals animals must receive so they

can tolerate the feedlot lifestyle), often ends up in places it shouldn't be, rather than in pastures, where it would be harmless. Grain fed animals, it appears, develop newer and stronger bacteria in response to the overly acidic environment produced by massive grain feeding. Feedlot animals are forced to stand all day in confined areas in their own manure and cannot help but be covered in it. Grass raised cattle are not confined and less likely to be covered in their own manure. At the end of the day, pragmatically, the only way to cut down your risk of becoming ill from a virulent strain of E. Coli is to eat grass-fed meats.

[http://www.wellfed.net/growersandgrocers/growgrocers.php/2006/10/23/grass\\_is\\_good](http://www.wellfed.net/growersandgrocers/growgrocers.php/2006/10/23/grass_is_good)

ON Friday, Mexico lifted its ban on lettuce following the FDA's confirmation that the Nunes Co.'s lettuce was not tainted with the pathogen after a well tested positive.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/living/community/15810555.htm>

The American Council on Health and Science recommends irradiation for eliminating E. Coli. They have published an article advocating their position. "Irradiation has been approved by the FDA as a method to ensure microbiological safety of fresh and frozen meat, poultry, shell eggs, crustaceans, and dried food, such as spices and vegetable seasoning and sprouting seeds. It is used widely to ensure hygienic quality of spices and vegetable seasonings and, to a certain extent, of ground beef and poultry. In 1986, the FDA approved the use of irradiation of fresh produce only for insect disinfestations and to delay physiological growth (such as ripening of fruits, sprout inhibition of roots and tubers, etc.) but *not* for pathogen control. For unclear reasons, the FDA continues to delay the approval, based on a petition submitted by the National Food Processor Association (NFPA) in 2000, of irradiated ready-to-eat food including fresh, pre-cut fruits and vegetables."

[http://www.acsh.org/factsfears/newsID.865/news\\_detail.asp](http://www.acsh.org/factsfears/newsID.865/news_detail.asp)