

Food Safety Alert – 12/08/06

ABC News is reporting that the green onions that are suspected in the most recent E. coli outbreak came from Southern California. Ready Pac Produce is the sole supplier of scallions to Taco Bell restaurants in New York, New Jersey and the greater Philadelphia area. Ready Pac gets them from Boskovich Farms, Inc. of Oxnard, California. They were washed, chopped and packed for distribution by Ready Pac in the Florence, New Jersey processing plant. This is the second time in four months that Ready Pac has been implicated in an E. coli outbreak within the past four months. The Ready Pac label was among the brands pulled from the shelves when the spinach outbreak occurred. Green onions have been the source of nine food-borne illness cases within the last twelve years. Because onions have many layers, it makes it very difficult to wash them. California is the nation's largest supplier of green onions. However, as winter progresses the green onions are imported from Mexico. The first lawsuit has already been filed against Taco Bell.

The lawsuit was brought by the parents of an 11-year-old boy from Riverhead, NY (Long Island). The claim of negligence states he ate three tacos with cheese and lettuce. Steve Dickstein, marketing VP for Irwindale-based Ready Pac says the "investigation continues as to whether they [green onions] were contaminated. State and federal officials are also looking at cheese, lettuce, yellow onions and tomatoes as they attempt to narrow the cause of the outbreak down.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory?id=2708156>

The FDA is now assisting in the investigation according to a statement issued on their website Dec. 6. They are working with Taco Bell, Suppliers and distributors to determine the cause and prevent future cases of illness. According to the FDA, states with probable cases are: New Jersey (20); New York (15); Pennsylvania (7); and Delaware (1). To date, 35 have been hospitalized according to the statement by the FDA. Three of those with HUS. The CDC indicates that the first case was Nov. 20 and the latest was on December 2. Taco Bell has voluntarily removed green onions from all of its stores nationwide. The FDA has not ruled out other causes. Cilantro, cheddar cheese, blended cheese, green onions, yellow onions, tomatoes and lettuce are also being looked at in this investigation.

<http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2006/NEW01517.html>

The latest government figures come from the CDC website posted yesterday afternoon. They indicate there are now 58 cases associated with the outbreak and that two more states have been included in investigation. New Jersey now has 28 cases, New York 19 cases, Pennsylvania 8 cases, and Delaware 1 case. The other two states are South Carolina and Utah. Each has one case reported. 83% have been hospitalized and 12% have developed HUS. Some preliminary results indicate the possible presence of E. coli on green onions, but this has not been "confirmed" yet in further lab testing.

<http://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/2006/december/120706.htm>