

Food Safety Alert – 12/12/06

The Washington Post is running an article that says U.S. lawmakers have vowed to make food safety a top priority when the new session of Congress convenes in January. U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) commenting on the food safety system says it “appears to have broken down when you have these outbreaks almost every single week.” DeLauro will be in charge of the House agriculture appropriations committee. She has indicated her first hearing will focus on food safety. A bill similar to legislation first introduced by Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) in 1999 may find its way back on the table. It called for the food safety divisions of the USDA and the FDA to be incorporated under one umbrella. 76 million cases of foodborne illness are reported annually. However, Susan Stout, Vice President of Federal Affairs with the Grocery Manufacturers Association believes that one agency may not be the panacea the lawmakers envision. She believes more staffing, coordination between the agencies and additional inspection of imported foods are necessary to decrease threats to our nation food supply.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/11/AR2006121100854.html>

In a related article, *Science Daily* is reporting that the recent E. coli outbreak in spinach has led to renewed calls for the creation of a single, independent federal agency devoted to integrated regulation of animal and plant production. Bette Hileman, senior editor for Chemical and Engineering News, says that a gap has long existed in the way foods are regulated. Currently, responsibilities are split between the USDA and the FDA. No agency oversees the farm-based safety issues that have led to the spinach outbreak and other recent E. coli episodes. The USDA maintains 7,000 inspectors that visit 6,000 food processing plants daily. By contrast, the FDA utilizes only 800 inspectors capable of inspecting a particular plant once every five years.

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/12/06121115539.htm>

The *LA Times* is reporting that the CDC is warning people not to take antibiotics should they become ill from the recent outbreaks of E. coli contamination that have hit the country in recent months. For greater than five years both the CDC and the AMA have advised against using them because they have shown evidence of making people sicker. Some doctors still prescribe antibiotics because they are either unaware of the advice or don't find evidence of the risk convincing. 10 states are taking part in a study to determine if antibiotics are a risk factor during an E. coli contamination or outbreak.

http://www.latimes.com/features/health/medicine/la-me-antibiotics11dec11_0,1486968.story?coll=la-health-medicine

According to the *Des Moines Register*, health officials in Black Hawk County continue to investigate the source of illness that has sickened nearly 40 people who ate a Taco John's restaurant in Cedar Falls. So far, 14 have been hospitalized. Preliminary results indicate E. coli is the likely cause that has sent 18 people to the hospital. The majority of the ill ate at the restaurant between Nov. 30 and Dec. 1. Tests to confirm the source to be E. coli will be in by the end of the month. While they are not stating which food source is the vehicle for contamination, two food products are being looked at. There is no link between Taco Bell and Wyoming-based Taco Johns.

<http://desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061211/NEWS/61211040/1001/SPORTS>

The Monterey County Herald has posted an article on their website that indicates E. coli O157:H7 has not been found in federal testing of green onions at Taco Bell restaurants in the Northeast. White onions test have tested positive for E. coli, but not the same strain that has sickened more than 64 people and hospitalized 49. "In that context, we have not ruled out any food items," said Dr. David Acheson, chief medical officer for the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition." Apparently a mix up in labeling the samples led to the initial conclusion that it was tied to green onions. The strain they found did not match any from the previous 30 days in terms of a single "fingerprint." Taco Bell has switched providers of green onions.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/news/state/16220155.htm>

The Health Section of ABC News online is also running an article similar to the one the Herald is running. However, it adds that 120 food items are being testing from the Taco Bell chain of restaurants that were impacted by the E. coli outbreak. The article also states that approximately 311 have fallen ill. However, only 22 are confirmed.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/story?id=2717586&page=1>