

Food Safety Alert – 12/14/06

The FDA has posted a press release stating that they have narrowed their investigation. They are focusing on finding the source(s) of shredded lettuce that are served at the restaurant. Three items – shredded lettuce, cheddar cheese, and meat – were implicated by the CDC as most likely to have been the vehicle of transmission of the sometimes deadly bacteria. Cheese was being looked at because of the pasteurization process; ground beef was under scrutiny because contaminated undercooked meat can lead to an outbreak. Lettuce is considered to be the source based upon statistics. “The information about items likely to have transmitted the pathogen in this outbreak comes from a CDC ‘case control’ study, which involves interviewing ill and well Taco Bell restaurant patrons about what food items they consumed. By comparing foods consumed by ill and well persons, investigators can show statistical links to particular food ingredients. This does not establish that these foods are the causes of the outbreak, but it does give clues as to where further investigation should focus to try to find hard evidence of the cause.” The FDA also reports that this outbreak does not appear to be tied to the E. coli outbreak at Taco John’s in Iowa and Minnesota.

<http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2006/NEW01525.html>

The CDC indicates that 48 of the 71 ill persons are confirmed to have the same “DNA footprint.” “As a result of testing by PulseNet, cases with the outbreak strain ‘fingerprint’ pattern are being re-classified as confirmed cases, and cases with an unrelated ‘fingerprint’ pattern are being dropped from the outbreak case count.” The CDC says that because multiple Taco Bell restaurants were involved at the same time, the lettuce was probably contaminated prior to reaching the restaurants.

On December 4, a sample of chopped yellow onions tested positive for E. coli O157:H7. However, the “DNA fingerprint” pattern for that strain is different than the strain that is being implicated in this outbreak. The pattern that was in the chopped onion strain has not been seen before in ill persons in this country. Despite the focus being narrowed to shredded lettuce, only the yellow onions have tested positive for E. coli. No other food item has a definite or even a preliminary positive test for O157.

<http://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/current.htm>

The *Monterey County Herald* is reporting that lettuce is to blame yet health officials have not ruled out Cheddar cheese and beef. According to the article, the shredded lettuce was not likely grown in the Salinas Valley. The last harvests for head lettuce generally occur around Halloween. Production then continues to the south in Imperial Valley, Yuma or Mexico. However, without knowing conclusively that lettuce is the source of the contamination, it damages an entire industry. “Four or five days ago, it was the green onions. Now they are saying it’s not the green onions,” said Joe Pezzini, vice president of operations for Castroville-based Ocean Mist and chairman of the Grower Shipper Association of Central California. “But the damage has been done. Now what are the media outlets going to do? Retract that?”

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/16237015.htm>

According to the *Californian*, even if local lettuce (or any lettuce at all) is not the source of the outbreak, there may be obvious fallout here. Yet the CDC believes shredded lettuce to be the culprit. “(Lettuce) I would say is the most likely vehicle. I would warn we are not done with the investigation,” Dr. Christopher Braden, a medical epidemiologist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told reporters. Interviews with patients and other investigative work pointed toward lettuce as the culprit.” Lettuce is Monterey County’s leading crop with revenues of more than \$900 million last year. No lettuce is grown in December in the County to prevent the spread of the lettuce mosaic virus.

While this will certainly damage the industry, Sam Farr came out quickly backing Salinas Agribusiness. “The FDA has not linked the chopped lettuce to a specific farm or area of the country,” Farr said. “I have a close working relationship with the lettuce industry in the Salinas Valley, and I know they will go above and beyond the call to resolve the problem once the source of any contamination is identified, as they continue to do regarding the unrelated outbreak in bagged spinach earlier this year.”

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061214/NEWS01/612140334>

The Mercury News (and others) is reporting that Taco Bell has switched suppliers of lettuce and cheese in the states that were affected by the outbreak in the Northeast. They selected Taylor Farms of Salinas. Taco Bell President Greg Creed says, "The reason we changed supply in these four states is obviously to assure everyone that we can leave lettuce on the menu, as well as cheese." Creed declined to name the previous, yet he stated that Taco Bell purchased less than 20% of its lettuce from the undisclosed firm.

<http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/16232929.htm>