

Food Safety Alert – 12/15/06

The Salinas Californian is reporting that leaders in the growing industry are understandably upset that the CDC and FDA have jumped to link lettuce to the Taco Bell E. coli outbreak in the Northeast. At this point there is little to no evidence to support narrowing the investigation to lettuce. No positive tests have come back on the bacteria being in lettuce. "They should do their research before they start smearing products," said Tom Russell, president of Salinas-based grower Pacific International Marketing. "Each time they do it, they drive prices down." Bob Perkins, executive director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau, says it undermines consumer confidence and doesn't arm consumers with the information necessary to protect themselves from becoming ill. "Jim Bogart, president of the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California, said the purpose of the FDA's public updates on the outbreak isn't always clear and adds to confusion when the information changes." It will now be difficult to determine the cause as there have been no positive tests for E. coli on lettuce and it has either been eaten or thrown out.

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061215/NEWS01/612150302>

The FDA has a new press release on their website stating the E. coli outbreak at Taco Bell is probably over at this point. The information comes from the CDC. More cases could still be identified as test results come in, however. Shredded iceberg lettuce remains the most likely source despite having had no positive tests for bacteria. There have been a total of 71 cases in five states. Of those 71, 53 were hospitalized. Eight persons contracted hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). The FDA continues to trace the channels of distribution to identify the farm or farms as well as all facilities and firms that handled the product.

The FDA is still monitoring the outbreak of E. coli at Taco John's restaurants. Based on DNA "fingerprints", it does not appear that the Taco Bell and Taco John outbreaks are related. The states affected in the Taco John cases are Iowa and Minnesota.

<http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2006/NEW01527.html>

For a complete list of FDA press releases regarding the Taco Bell outbreak, please visit:

<http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/EcoliOutbreaks/restaurants.html>

The Monterey County Herald is reporting that cases of foodborne illness are on the decline and have been since 1996. Cases in the past were typically linked only to meat and dairy. However, in recent years the number of cases related to produce has more than doubled. In 1999, there were 40 cases associated E. coli. In 2004, the latest year for which data are available, there were 86 cases. Each case represents approximately 50 people.

New technology and more informed consumers could be the reason for the spike in reported cases. Decades ago, people might just assume it was the 24-hour flu. Today, people are more inclined to go to their doctor to determine what's wrong. Health officials believe most cases of contamination occur on the farm. And with today's farming operations, this means more locations receive the tainted product simultaneously. Farmers are tired of the attention the recent cases have brought and are working to implement marketing agreements and orders. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, however, is petitioning the government to introduce legislation that will set regulations on manure, irrigation and sanitation.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/16247832.htm>