

Food Safety Alert – 12/19/06

The Sacramento Bee is reporting this morning that various proposals are on the table that attempt to make produce safer. This could give spinach and iceberg lettuce the seal of approval with consumers. More details are being provided than were available in my update yesterday. It has been confirmed that the draft proposal was sent strictly to shippers and packers. The proposal was drafted by Western Growers and other trade industry groups with oversight going to the CDFA. It is a voluntary program. The grower-shipper program would be funded by five cents per carton of produce. A “certification mark” or label would be put on packaging to show that the produce was “handled, shipped and sold” using industry “best practices.” Details about what constitute best practices are being worked out they may include periodic or routine inspections by federal, state and county officials. Soil and water tests as well as increased washing of produce may be the basis for some of the minimum standards. A mandatory program is being developed that would deal specifically with leafy greens.

State Senator Dean Florez (D-Shafter) is critical of the plan and believes it will not raise consumer confidence. “I don't think it does a thing to make a consumer feel any better about lettuce or spinach in their mouth,” said Florez, who plans to hold a legislative hearing on the proposal.” Florez argues that mandatory procedures should be embedded in state law. He plans to introduce legislation that would increase testing of irrigation water, increase sanitary procedures for workers and give the CDFA full authority to recall produce. Many in the industry feel the voluntary program will be sufficient as it will “force” companies to participate to satisfy consumers.

<http://www.sacbee.com/103/story/94263.html>

According to the *Western Farm Press*, Trevor Suslow, extension specialist in postharvest pathology at UC Davis, is preparing a water-quality action threshold plan that will survey the amount of E. coli bacteria found in surface water supplies. The plan is based on three years of research that Suslow did for the California Lettuce Research Board in various locations throughout the Salinas Valley and other locations across the state. More than 500 water samples were gathered and analyzed. He says, however, that water-quality indicators have their limitations. “There is no single indicator that meets all the criteria we need for predictability, practicality, or cost effectiveness,” says Suslow. His goal is to establish a baseline from bi-monthly testing during the course of one season. If a water sample exceeds 126 E.coli per 100 milliliters in any sample, the water would be tested more frequently in hopes of finding the source of the contamination. Once the source is identified, solutions can be created or geared toward cleaning up the supply or shutting it down for irrigation purposes. E. coli, once in the groundwater, can show up days or centuries later depending on soil strata and the location of aquifers.

<http://westernfarmpress.com/news/121806-ecoli-water/>

The news journal *Delaware Online* is reporting that DuPont has received approval from Canadian Health, the federal agency that oversees food safety in Canada, to sell an E. coli produce test in that country. The test, which is known as BAX(R), can be used by packers, processors and service labs to test for the potentially deadly bacteria. It had previously been used to test meat, apple cider and orange juice. The USDA Safety and Inspection Service adopted the test only last year. The kit includes bulk powder or a soluble packet and a small machine that can read the DNA “fingerprint” of the sample. The product can conduct 96 tests in approximately four hours.

<http://www.delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061218/BUSINESS/61218010>