

Food Safety Alert – 12/22/06

According to an article by the Associated Press, there is a proposal by the FDA to consolidate its network of labs that would result in the closure of as many as seven federal labs that help safeguard the nation's food supply. Some of these labs investigate public health threats like the recent E. coli outbreaks in spinach and presumably lettuce. Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility believe this could result in slower responses to outbreaks or to a bioterrorism response. The FDA is currently looking into ways to prioritize the closures and match its resources with its responsibilities operationally. Julie Zawisza, an FDA spokeswoman, says, "we are committed to our mission of protecting and advancing the public health and continually explore ways to improve our field operations." An email was sent out by Margaret Glavin, associate commissioner of regulatory affairs, on December 6 to team leadership stating that over the coming weeks they would discuss which labs would close and which ones would remain open. While no labs were specifically listed in the email, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Detroit, Cincinnati, Philadelphia and Kansas City labs are being considered.

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20061222/ap_on_go_ca_st_pe/fda_labs_3

Another article, this one by *Ag Weekly*, shows farmers upset at the suggestion that lettuce was at the center of the E. coli outbreak at Taco Bell restaurants. Growers believe that the feds were too quick to link lettuce and jeopardize their sales. "They should do their research before they start smearing products," said Tom Russell, president of Salinas, Calif.-based grower Pacific International Marketing. "Each time they do it, they drive prices down." Shredded lettuce that may have sickened people has either been eaten or thrown away, so they were not able to test it directly, according to federal health officials. Lettuce became the "most likely vehicle" based on interviews, other investigative work and the fact that it is included in 70 percent of the menu items at Taco Bell. Taco Bell has not named its previous supplier nor have they specified where it was grown other than to say "in the West." Growers have been striving since the first E. coli outbreak in late August to take every precaution with food safety. They have been very vigilant in their testing of soil, water, fertilizers and the crops themselves. Ag industry leaders say it is too early to tell if lettuce sales would be affected by the outbreak in Taco Bell restaurants.

<http://www.agweekly.com/articles/2006/12/21/news/updates/update02.txt>

Taco Bell may have been quicker than Taco John's in taking measures to reassure its customers that it was safe to eat there again, but Taco John's is taking its commitment to its eating public further than Taco Bell. CEO Paul FisherKeller said the company will be paying the medical expenses of each person that was affected by the E. coli outbreak at its Midwest restaurants, according to an article by the *Insurance Journal*. Timothy Coombs, a crisis consultant based out of Charleston, Illinois had this to say about taking care of the ill: "For the CEO to publicly state that they're going to take care of the costs, that's important. "A mistake companies sometimes make is they take a legal approach." One thing is clear, this approach may head off lawsuits and help the restaurant chain reach settlements faster. All subsequent tests of its 133 Iowan and Minnesotan restaurants have come back clean. Health officials have said that they believe the E. coli came from lettuce and they suspect it was contaminated in the fields. It has not been confirmed that the source is lettuce or that the contamination source was the fields.

<http://www.insurancejournal.com/news/midwest/2006/12/21/75297.htm>