

Food Safety Alert – 2/05/07

WJLA-TV in Washington, D.C. is reporting that, after months of testing, public health officials cannot link the E. coli-related death of an elderly Maryland resident to the E. coli spinach outbreak last fall.

“Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene spokeswoman Karen Black says neither her agency nor the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were able to find the particular strain of E. coli blamed for the national outbreak in samples of colon tissue from the Maryland resident or from a partial bag of spinach in the home.”

The CDC did find another strain of E. coli in the spinach that was “indistinguishable” from a strain found in a bag of spinach from Illinois that also contained the outbreak strain. “A lawyer for Dunning’s family says the evidence is strong enough to sustain their wrongful death lawsuit against Dole Food Company and Natural Selection Foods, both of California.”

<http://www.wjla.com/news/stories/0207/393937.html>

Consumers’ confidence in leafy greens is still shaken, according to a survey in the *Monterey County Herald*. The survey, released today by Rutgers University, suggests that the spinach recall may have lasting effects on some leafy green sales. William K. Hallman, director of the Food Policy Institute at Rutgers, says that the spinach recall and the E. coli contamination at Taco Bell months later were “signal events” in the consumers’ perception of food safety. “‘Consumers’ expectations were violated by the fact that a product they thought was clean and wholesome turned out to be something they did not expect,’ he said. ‘It raises questions about other produce that are grown in the same way.’”

Results of the survey were surprising. 9 out of 10 consumers said they had heard about the recall, but 1 in 3 had no idea the recall was over. 20 percent of those surveyed stopped eating bagged vegetables all together. 3 in 4 with spinach in their home threw it out regardless of the brand name. Even 7 percent threw out fresh produce other than spinach. A staggering 50 percent have not returned to eating spinach. “‘The spinach contamination may have had a spillover effect to other produce items,’ said Ed Mackowiak, vice president of sales for FreshLook Marketing. His company’s survey of 17,000 grocery stores, not including Wal-Mart or Costco, showed a nearly 17 percent drop in sales of bulk and bagged spinach for 2006 as compared to a year ago.”

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/news/nation/16625598.htm>

An editorial in the *Herald* says “Senator should chill rhetoric.” Echoing what many in the produce industry believe, the column says “To the greatest extent possible, it makes sense to have the industry create its own rules rather than wait for Florez’s legislation to wind its way through the Legislature. The industry understands the issues better than anyone. It should be able to design effective and efficient safety programs that can be updated easily as more is learned about the causes of contamination.” The writer believes that the industry would be better served by helping fine-tune his bills rather than fight him.

Recently, Florez has cranked up the rhetoric. “‘Should our health and safety standards be in the hands of an industry that has been the source of so many contaminations in the past?’” He didn’t stop there. “‘We need to clean up this industry,’ he told Los Angeles Times. He said spinach and lettuce producers, unlike other segments of agriculture, had not followed voluntary protocols. It is, the senator said, ‘a very rogue industry.’”

The editorial concluded by saying, “Successful legislation is a product of compromise. When he vilifies others involved in the process, the senator makes it harder to come up with a system that works. If he can back up his words, he owes it to consumers to do so. If he can’t, he owes it to the industry to back off.”

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/news/editorial/16614687.htm>

Here is a link from the *Salinas Californian* to press conference comments he made prior to introducing his package of three bills aimed at regulating the leafy green industry:

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/frontpage>