

Food Safety Alert – 2/28/07

The *Monterey County Herald* is reporting this morning that the source of the E. coli outbreak in spinach has been tied to a farm in San Benito County. State health investigators confirmed at an agricultural meeting in Sacramento yesterday that the contaminated spinach did not come from Monterey County. However, “Dr. Jeff Farrar, chief of the state's Food and Drug Branch, and Dr. Kevin Reilly, deputy director for Prevention Services, declined to identify the farm during a hearing Tuesday before members of the Senate and Assembly agriculture committees. Instead, they said they plan to release their final report with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in coming weeks, at which time the farm from which the contaminated spinach came would be identified.”

Industry members say that it doesn't matter which farm the spinach came from. Jim Bogart, president and general counsel of the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California, said, “Even if it's just one grower, in one county, on one shift, we need to address that. To me, it's not so much a question of who, but how and why.” Dr. Jeff Farrar, chief of the state's Food and Drug Branch, when pressed by Sen. Maldonado to name the farm responded by saying it was traced a 50-acre plot of land in San Benito County. They stated that the land was being transitioned from conventional farming to organic farming.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/16800676.htm>

Here's the link to a related story from the *Salinas Californian*:

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070228/NEWS01/702280317>

According to the *Fresno Bee*, 51 out of about 85 leafy greens handlers are signed on to the Marketing Agreement. This represents approximately 90 percent of the volume of leafy greens in the state. This information was provided to a joint hearing of the state Assembly and Senate agriculture committees yesterday. Key questions remain on how the industry-led program will treat the seals that will be put on each piece of produce and what the metrics to the industry GAPs will be. “That led lawmakers to pose a potential dilemma with the safety seal program: If there is another outbreak, and it occurs at a company using a seal, would consumers then be afraid of products with seals, therefore leading companies to shy away from the program?” Sen. Den Florez feels this could lead to the seal becoming the “mark of a tainted product.”

Jasper Hempel says that the seals are important, but the core of the MA is to deal with best practices. “Indeed, it's possible that consumers may never see the seal. Rather, labels might be used as more of an internal control, industry officials said in interviews after the hearing. As for the best practices, Hempel said proposals are being reviewed by experts and should be voted on by the board soon.” The self-imposed deadline to get things implemented is April 1.

“Tuesday's hearing was led by Assembly Member Nicole Parra, D-Hanford, leader of the Assembly Agriculture Committee. Florez, who favors a state-controlled inspection program instead of the industry proposal, has said he plans to hold his own hearing today.”

<http://www.fresnobee.com/170/story/32341.html>