

Food Safety Alert – 12/18/06

According to the *Monterey County Herald*, Salinas Mayor Donohue called on the FDA to be more careful when identifying the sources of the recent E. coli outbreaks. He says those remarks are hurting Salinas Valley's image and the prices growers receive for their produce. He stated this during his first news conference since becoming mayor. This comes in the wake of the most recent outbreak. "It appears the FDA is swinging from the trees," Donohue said. "First, it was the onions, then lettuce. And the culprit on this recent incident has not been confirmed." FDA spokesperson Julie Zawisza fired back that it was Taco Bell that implicated green onions and withdrew them from their menu briefly. The FDA believes that shredded iceberg lettuce is to blame based on conclusions from the CDC. The article states that the outbreak prompted the agency to inform the public of its preliminary results.

Currently there is a draft proposal that would demonstrate California produce is safe by placing a safety seal on lettuce and spinach. The voluntary initiative was sent to shippers and packers this week. However, a mandatory program is currently being developed for lettuce and spinach growers. A "certification mark" would be used to confirm to consumers that best agricultural practices were used. Participants would pay up to 5 cents per carton to receive the mark. Best agricultural practices are being developed, but future rules could include testing soils and water as well as increased washing of fresh produce. Verifications would be made by federal, state and county inspectors.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/living/community/16256367.htm>

Land Line Magazine tells us that the "best agricultural practices" discussed above have left us with many unanswered questions. Cost and how soon consumers can expect to see the labeling among them. Western Growers spokesman Tim Chelling says of the voluntary plan that this marketing agreement is a "big deal." It started out as a mandatory plan industry-wide, but has become a voluntary open solely to shippers and packers. However, the California Department for Food and Agriculture will take on an advisory role in the marketing agreement process. In turn, the CDFA will work with the USDA to train enforcement agents to conduct on-site safety inspections at growers' and packers' facilities. A hearing on best practices is scheduled for Jan. 12, 2007 at the Monterey County Fairgrounds.

http://www.landlinemag.com/todays_news/Daily/2006/Dec06/121106/121506-01.htm

In a recent article from the *Detroit News*, the FDA acknowledges that it doesn't know how the E. coli bacteria has developed into such nasty strains lately, but they want to find out. "We need to deal with facts. Right now, we can't say what is happening," said Robert Mandrell, research leader of the U.S Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service Produce Safety and Microbiology Research Unit and the other co-leader of the project."

In recent years everything from airborne cow lot dust to deer to feral pigs have been to blame for the outbreaks. Salinas Valley is no exception as it has seen nine outbreaks in the past 11 years and they are all attributed to the above-mentioned causes. Many in the Salinas Valley believe it is because cattle grazing occurs on the upland areas of the valley called "benches." The article claims that some waterways of the valley contain 12,000 or more E. coli organisms per 100 milliliters of water. This amounts to 30 times the federal standard. The research unit will use the same type of genetic "fingerprint" to test various strains. The labs want to confirm links between different people in different locations suspected to be sick from the same source. They hope that will give clues to the answers of where and how.

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061216/NATION/612160352/1040/LIFESTYLE03>

Provided below is a link to the State Water Resource Control Board's (SWRCB) website that shows which District 3 waterways are above the federal standard for water quality and safety.

http://www.swrcb.ca.gov/tmdl/docs/303dlists2006/final/r3_final303dlist.pdf

Dennis Olson, professor of animal science at Iowa State University, believes the technology currently exists to inexpensively and easily kill the E. coli bacteria long before it reaches consumers according to

an article in the *Quad-City Times*. He is an advocate for irradiating fresh produce much in the same way we have been doing so to meat since 2000. Currently the FDA does not allow fresh produce to be irradiated. Olson claims that doing so would cost just a few extra cents and have a nominal impact on taste. However, advocates of irradiation face some hurdles. Not only is it banned by the FDA, there is opposition from consumer groups as well as consumers themselves. Consumer groups would want labeling that indicates when fresh produce has been irradiated.

<http://www.qctimes.net/articles/2006/12/14/news/local/doc4580f3cce59c9124155183.txt>