

# E. coli story about more than spinach

**T**HE Salinas spinach story is somewhat like the Mark Foley political scandal — it only gets worse. Now the story has come full circle to where it started: lettuce. Salinas-based Nunes Co. has voluntarily recalled some of its lettuce sold under the Foxy brand. It was a proactive move by the company that said no lettuce had tested positive for *E. coli*, but it had found the bacteria in samples of irrigation water.

More than two dozen people were sickened in 2005 from bagged salads packaged by Dole. In August this year,

## EDITORIALLY SPEAKING

the Food and Drug Administration issued a Lettuce Safety Initiative in response to recurring outbreaks of *E. coli* associated with fresh-cut lettuce.

The *E. coli* feeding frenzy has not been limited to spinach or lettuce. The California Department of Health Services linked a case of illness from

the bacteria to raw milk products from Organic Pastures in Fresno County. Data also linked the sickness of an 8-year-old San Diego County boy to raw cow colostrum. A recall and quarantine was ordered Sept. 22 and lifted Sept. 29.

Yes, some have tried to connect the recent outbreaks to organic products, but that has failed even with the connection to Earthbound Farms. Indeed, some of the best PR we have seen, even if low-key, is from the Organic Center. Instead of finger pointing, it provides facts, which are harder to find than

rumors. On its Web site, [www.organiccenter.org](http://www.organiccenter.org), you can find a bibliography containing 200 studies regarding *E. coli* and a Critical Issue Report, "*E. coli* 0157: H7 Frequently Asked Questions."

### Good news

The Organic Center report contains some hard-to-find good news. For example, there are more than 225 serotypes (unique strains) of *E. coli*, the majority of which are not dangerous. "Indeed, *E. coli* bacteria are essential to the healthy functioning of human and animal digestive systems."

Or, consider this: "Government agencies teamed together to form FoodNet a few years ago. This program collects and analyzes the latest data on foodborne illnesses and outbreaks ([www.cdc.gov/foodnet](http://www.cdc.gov/foodnet)). Based on the most recent data from FoodNet, there has been about a 29% reduction in the number of *E. coli* 0157 cases since 1996-98."

It also shows the distribution of *E. coli* outbreaks from foodborne transmission. Ground beef caused 41% of reported outbreaks between 1982 and 2002, and produce caused another 21%. For produce alone, 34% was attributed to lettuce, 18% to apple juice or cider, 16% to salad, 11% to coleslaw, 11% to melons, 8% to sprouts and 3% to grapes.

### Do the job right

Many, of course, are already blaming someone else. Some cattle producers, for example, say they are being blamed because *E. coli* is associated with cattle manure, and that's enough evidence to convict producers and packers. Naturally, some states are rushing to label their products "not from California." And Dole is passing the blame to Natural Selection Foods, saying it doesn't own the company and sidestepping its responsibility not only to customers, but also to its brand.

The best solution is proactive prevention with no loopholes, no shortcuts and no exceptions. We report (see Page 8) on the best example we have found: Markon Cooperative, Salinas. It goes beyond Good Agricultural Practices, Good Manufacturing Practices and Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points. Markon's 5-Star Food Safety Audit Program requires third-party audits — pass/fail — for fields, grower-shippers, transport, distributors and warehouses.

When the produce industry adopts this model, the salad bowl and consumers will be safe. Then we can do something about the bigger problem of health and obesity.

### Rights and responsibilities

Consumers have a right to safe and healthy food. But they also have responsibilities. They must properly store and cook food to prevent spoilage and cross contamination. To stay healthy, people need to choose foods each day that meet their nutritional needs, while avoiding excess caloric intake. They also must be prepared to pay a price for food that does more than keep everyone in the food system willing to get up the next day and go to work. Farmers and the food industry need to make enough money to invest in the skills, tools, systems and science needed to make food safer and more nutritious on a continuous basis.

Farmers have rights, too. They can grow what they want using agronomic systems to their liking. They can work their soil with any kind of tillage implement or none at all. They can apply pesticides in accord with product labels, even if the chemicals sometimes kill birds and fish. They can plant genetically modified crops or pass up the chance. Livestock farmers can treat their animals like house pets or push them to grow faster or produce more, even to the point of premature death. They can regularly clean livestock water troughs and feed bunks to prevent the spread of pathogenic bacteria like *E. coli* 0157 or never clean, either. They can store and apply animal manure in ways that lead to runoff into surface water or leaching to groundwater. Each of these on-farm decisions has consequences that arise beyond the edge of the farm.

Like anyone, or any group with rights, farmers have responsibilities. The most basic are to produce safe food, sustain the productivity of land and treat animals humanely. They also have responsibilities to their families, neighbors and workers. I think the vast majority of farmers accept these responsibilities and do most everything they know about to live up to them.

The enormous challenge faced by farmers and the food industry in responding to the tragic *E. coli* poisoning episode linked to California spinach can be traced to a disconnect between farmer and consumer rights and responsibilities. Solutions to *E. coli* problems in California will require a sea of change in attitudes and practices on the farm, in the food industry, and in government and politics.

Meaningful, systemwide progress will not come from class action lawsuits and finger pointing, although a measure of both is inevitable. Reconnecting rights and responsibilities, however, will be necessary and helpful. In the past, when consumers or farmers have been asked

to give up a right or assume a new responsibility, they typically have needed help in understanding what to do, time to make adjustments, and motivation or incentives to get on with the job. Just imagine if the money and human talent invested in litigating the spinach episode and trying to affix blame on a lack of government regulations, organic farming or the weather were redirected to a sincere effort to immediately initiate and pay for proven, preventive interventions?

It will not be enough to redefine rights and responsibilities. That can be done on paper. What we need is an orchestrated symphony of tangible action. We need actions that are channeled systematically to achieve a common goal: safe food. In the wake of this episode, actions will be taken, but will they deliver optimal results? They will come closest if they are guided throughout by a focus on future prevention (not past blame), solid information openly shared, willingness to accept responsibilities and help to everyone trying their best to do their part.

This is asking a lot given the sorry state of civil discourse and decision-making in America today. We must get serious about reconnecting rights and responsibilities so that food safety rarely, if ever again, falls so tragically through the cracks. This is needed if there is going to be a fresh-cut produce industry in California of the scale needed to help the nation turn around our epidemics of obesity, diabetes and other diet-related diseases.

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