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Letter to the Editor

Prevention will be key in responding to *E. coli* challenges

Dear Editor:

The search for greater certainty in preventing future *Escherichia coli* food poisoning episodes in fresh produce is headed the way of the beef cattle and dairy industries.

While the Food & Drug Administration has understandably focused on finding the specific spinach fields that triggered the current cluster of cases, it will not take long for people to ask, "Where did the pathogenic *E. coli* come from in the first place? What can be done to prevent future episodes as opposed to just more effectively detecting their sources?"

The gastrointestinal tract of bovine animals is clearly by far the major source of *E. coli* O157 bacteria. The bottom line is that substantial progress in reducing the number of *E. coli*-triggered illnesses will depend on reducing the frequency of pathogenic *E. coli* shedding by beef and dairy animals.

The feed industry will also be asked to play a role in devising and implementing truly sustainable solutions.

A number of recently pub-

lished studies have found pathogenic *E. coli* in a few percent to 10% or more of commercial livestock feed products. Much more work is needed to test livestock feeds, including those produced, harvested, stored and fed on the farm.

An impressive body of research on the epidemiology of *E. coli* O157 in the food supply has been completed, much of it initially triggered by the 1992-93 Jack-in-the-Box outbreak.

Scientists have identified several farm management practices that can trigger *E. coli* O157 proliferation in cattle and others that enable the spread of the bacterium through a herd or from one farm to the next. This research has led to identification of several preventive strategies, few of which have been adopted widely. None have been actively promoted by government or livestock industry trade associations.

Hopefully, this will change soon. Most European livestock farmers have managed to find ways to keep the frequency of *E. coli* O157 shed-

ding down well below 1% of animals. In the U.S., it is common for 5-10% of the animals in a herd to be infected and actively shedding pathogenic *E. coli*, especially in the spring and summer months.

Shedding rates as high as 30% of animals have been reported. We should ask scientists to probe why, and then industry should act on insights gained way before government gets around to mandating change.

Feedstuffs readers cannot have missed the steady flow of anti-organic commentary over the last few months. And in the last two weeks, promoters of biotechnology are trying to pin the current spinach episode on organic farmers.

Dean Kleckner, the former head of the American Farm Bureau Federation, wrote in a commentary posted on AgWeb Oct. 22 that the spinach "problem" came from an organic farm and that "this organic spinach" provided the late example of a serious contamination episode.

At a sad sign of the times, with a champion of sound science and sticking to the facts

like Kleckner proclaims that organic farming was the cause of the current outbreak given that information from FDA and industry sources linking the current contamination episode to a set of conventional spinach fields in three counties in California's Salinas Valley had already been widely reported in the media.

In the end, one or more organic spinach fields may also be identified as a source of *E. coli*-contaminated spinach. Those who maliciously jumped the gun to condemn organic farming have diverted attention from the real source of the problem and, in doing so, have done a disservice to everyone.

The Organic Center is interested in promoting food safety on all farms, not scoring points in the dead-end debate over biotech and organic farming.

We will soon announce a research program designed to address key *E. coli* challenges. How can dairy farmers and beef producers reduce the frequency of pathogenic *E. coli* shedding on their farms? What can organic and conven-

tional farmers do to improve the reliability of manure management and composting practices in keeping pathogenic *E. coli* away from crop production fields and off of harvested crops?

All livestock producers, especially those in regions where fresh fruits and vegetables are also widely grown, will need to shoulder a heavy burden if future episodes of *E. coli* food poisoning are to be prevented. They will need technical and financial assistance to quickly implement preventive strategies.

Organic farmers will gladly share the lessons they have learned in reducing pathogen loads in manure and compost, and the organic community will continually seek even more effective strategies.

Hopefully, together, all of agriculture will find and implement a cost-effective, comprehensive solution to a problem that is preventable and, for this reason, totally unacceptable.

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