

Environmental Destruction in the Salinas Valley: “Food Safety” Requirements to Remove Habitat Make Leafy Greens Less Safe

California’s Salinas Valley not only holds the distinction as the nation’s salad bowl, but also as being in the heart of the leafy green food safety crisis. While head lettuce has been grown commercially in this area for over a hundred years, baby lettuce and other processed greens have come to occupy a significant portion of the acreage in the last 20 years. With these changes, consumers have experienced an increase in the number of food safety illnesses—culminating in the fall of 2006 with alarming front page headlines publicizing *E. coli* 0157—contaminated spinach. Huge farm and shipping losses ensued. Rather than focusing on the problems inherent to bagging fresh leafy greens—or on cattle, which are the major source of *E. coli* 0157 on the landscape—buyers and shippers are targeting wildlife and their habitat as culprits. However, wildlife have not been proven to be significant vectors of *E. coli* 0157. The unfortunate and unscientific reaction has resulted in farmers being required to undertake draconian measures which only makes food less safe. Scientists have known for years that non-crop vegetation can effectively filter water- and dust-borne pathogens. Moreover, U.C. Davis researchers have shown that just a few meters of grass can filter *E. coli*, one of several kinds of vegetative filters that USDA has promoted and cost shared for the past several decades. The large grocery store chains and shippers requiring the removal of wildlife habitat for supposed food safety protections are shooting themselves in the foot and causing unneeded environmental destruction.

Leafy green growers are now being forced to remove vegetation to create bare ground buffers between crops and habitat and between crops and grazing lands, and to trap, poison, and fence out wildlife if they want to sell their crop. Last year, a survey¹ of growers in California’s Central Coast reported widespread pressure to remove habitat in order to meet food safety requirements. The environmental destruction exhibited in the following photographs decreases water quality, increases soil erosion, eliminates important wildlife habitat, and does not create safe food. Quite the contrary, it puts farmers, consumers and wildlife at risk.

¹ RCD of Monterey County. 2007. A growers survey: Reconciling food safety and environmental protection. www.rcdmonterey.org



Shippers and buyers are unreasonably pressuring farmers to remove wildlife habitat such as these mature trees that were growing adjacent to fields along the Salinas River. Wildlife have not been found to be significant vectors of *E. coli* 0157.



Farmers are reporting increasing pressure to remove everything (such as the trees shown above) that might attract wildlife to fields of leafy greens, and many other crops. Environmental regulations are ignored, as is the fact that non-crop vegetation is beneficial for food safety.



The red lines in the photos to the left indicate the same area at two different points in time. The top photo was taken in 2005 before the 2006 E. coli 0157 spinach contamination event that catalyzed increased pressure to remove habitat. The bottom photo was shot in 2008. Given that ninety to ninety-five percent of California's riparian habitat was historically destroyed, the little that remains is all the more valuable. On average, seventy-five percent of wildlife species use riparian areas at some point in their lifecycle.



When the 2008 aerial photo above is examined closely, piles of wood like the ones to the right can be seen to have been pushed back along the edge of the existing vegetation.





A healthy, 100' buffer of native trees existed on the Salinas River within the red lines of areas (a), (b), and (c) in the above 2005 photo. This same vegetation is missing in the 2008 photos on the right.



National Agriculture
Imagery Program 2005



Jitze Couperus/Lightbox 2008



Tree lines that served as windbreaks and habitat for beneficial insects and rodent-eating raptors in the past are rapidly being removed because of the unfounded fear that native birds are significant vectors of E. coli 0157. The top photo was taken in 2005 and the two bottom photos were taken in 2008.

This fence in the Salinas River floodplain interferes with the movement of wide-ranging wildlife between important water sources and nearby uplands. When fencing is used, it should surround the perimeter of the crop, not the border of the property.



Depending on the requirements of the food safety auditor, farmers are made to deploy either poison bait or traps in pvc stations like this one shown here. Small wildlife have not been found to be vectors of E. coli 0157; rather there is a risk of their being inadvertently collected during harvesting and ultimately bagged (wholly or in parts) with processed leafy greens. This is a difficulty with harvest techniques, not a life and death concern for humans.



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To obtain a copy of WFA's POLICY PAPER - Food Safety Requires a Healthy Environment: Policy Recommendations for E. coli 0157, go to: http://www.wildfarmalliance.org/resources/food_safety.htm