

Wildlife in Middle of War on E. Coli

By JANE ZHANG

May 2, 2008; Page A10

Farmers around California's "Salad Bowl" have mounted an assault against wildlife to appease buyers who worry about E. coli in their leafy greens.

About one-third of the farmers surveyed in the region have cleared wide swaths of land surrounding their fields, leaving felled trees scattered along the Salinas River. Most used poisons, traps or fences to keep out frogs, squirrels and other wildlife last year, according to a Monterey County Resource Conservation District survey. Some farmers let ponds and irrigation reservoirs -- potentially prime wildlife habitat -- go dry.

But the effort to eradicate the threat of E. coli rests on squishy science. Some fresh-produce processors and food retailers impose tough restrictions on the farmers they buy from. They have banned many animals, including tadpoles, that haven't shown a high risk of carrying the dangerous E. coli strain that caused the 2006 outbreak, killed three people and sickened 200 more. While that crisis was linked to fresh spinach grown in the Salinas Valley, the Food and Drug Administration hasn't been able to nail down the cause. It cited feral pigs and cattle grazing nearby as suspects.

Throughout the region, farmers are struggling with problems their predecessors faced going back to the origins of agriculture: How to keep hungry herbivores out of their fields. Now the worry isn't so much what they eat, but what they leave behind.

On one hand, there is a need to keep the food supply safe amid a fear that animal feces will cause another outbreak. On the other, there is a need to preserve the environment, driven in part by fears that upsetting the balance will subject their lands to unintended and harmful consequences over time.

Caught in the middle is wildlife whose complicity in the transmission of E. coli is unconfirmed. And farmers. While fresh-produce farmers are forced to absorb skyrocketing food-safety costs, not all of the measures are justified by science.

"Nobody wants unsafe food, but at what [environmental] cost? As a society, I don't think we answered that," says Rob Atwill, who heads the Western Institute for Food Safety and Security at the University of California at Davis. He and other scientists are studying the risk of E. coli contamination from wildlife.

Despite his concerns about harming the environment, Bob Martin, general manager of Rio Farms in King City, says he cleared vegetation and trapped and poisoned mice and squirrels on the 6,000-acre farmland that mainly produces leafy greens. To keep birds out of his property, he has

tried fences, propane-powered blast cannons, and hawk-like kites tied to poles. They work, but not for long. "It's all smoke and mirrors," he says, noting birds get used to the tricks.

To keep his fields as clean as possible, Mr. Martin says he spent more than \$500,000 in 2007 on food-safety steps, including a full-time food-safety overseer. He is chagrined much of the extra costs have been imposed without scientific proof of their necessity.

"We are definitely between a rock and a hard spot," says Mr. Martin, who is participating in a study of the risks of E. coli from deer. "I understand the necessity of adhering to a basic set of standards." But he thinks many measures are "window dressing."

Some farmers said buyers have rejected acres of lettuce and other leafy greens after inspectors saw "potential frog habitat" or tadpoles in a nearby creek.

Still, farmers adhere to the buyers' standards to eliminate the perceived risk and improve sales. Sales of bagged salads have yet to fully recover from the 2006 outbreak, and California fields have been linked to nearly half of the 22 produce-contamination cases between 1995 and 2006.

With no single standard among processors and retailers, many farmers struggle to meet the toughest ones. One set of rules -- 17 pages -- was written by the Food Safety Leadership Council, a group of food-service companies including [McDonald's Corp.](#), [Walt Disney Co.'s Walt Disney World Resort](#) and [Darden Restaurants Inc.](#), whose restaurant chains include Red Lobster. It states farmers must "reduce the presence of reptiles, insects, birds, rodents or other potential sources of contamination...through evaluation of adjacent land and elimination of possible vector attractants (rotting fruit, cull piles, etc)."

Leafy-green buyers say they are only trying to protect the public. "We will continue to evolve these standards as we get feedback from suppliers and stakeholders, and as science changes," says Andrea M. Finger, a spokeswoman for Walt Disney World Resort.

Some smaller farmers opt out. Dale Coke, owner of a 250-acre farm in San Juan Bautista, said he lost \$50,000 to \$60,000 in sales to Canadian buyers because he isn't participating in a California initiative that set standards for leafy-green growers. Had he signed up, he says, he would have to apply the rules to all of his crops, even though 70% aren't leafy greens.

Although Mr. Coke spends more than \$10,000 a year on food safety, he sells to wholesalers who don't require him to follow the "draconian measures" imposed by processors, he says.

Consumers need to communicate that "they will not tolerate environmental destruction for the production of their leafy greens," says Jo Ann Baumgartner, director of the Wild Farm Alliance. "These current practices in the Salinas Valley are bad for human health and bad for wildlife."

Write to Jane Zhang at Jane.Zhang@wsj.com