

Dole: E. coli may be from here

It's undetermined, but some lettuce in tainted salad is from Salinas Valley

By DAWN WITHERS
The Salinas Californian

Some of the lettuce used in bagged Dole salad recalled Monday for E. coli contamination has been traced back to the Salinas Valley, the company said Tuesday. Marty Ordman, spokesman for Dole Food Co. Inc, said three lettuces - romaine, green leaf and butter - are included in the recalled "Hearts Delight" mix. The romaine came from the Salinas Valley and Colorado, the butter lettuce from Ohio and green leaf from Salinas Valley. The salad was processed in Springfield, Ill. But Ordman said the company doesn't know which lettuce may have introduced E. coli O157:H7 into the bagged salad mix or how the leafy greens were contaminated. No illnesses linked to the salad have been reported, he said.

"We're as committed as ever (to food safety)," Ordman said.

The Canadian government issued a warning Sunday to consumers, telling them not to eat Dole's "Hearts Delight" brand bagged salad after a random test it conducted came back positive for E. coli O157:H7.

Ordman said the Canadian government tested just one bag of the salad mix before getting the positive test result. He said Dole is working closely with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to find out how the salad became tainted.

Garfield Balsom, spokesman for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, said the agency follows a protocol

to determine how many bags of salad to test, but he didn't know the sample size in this case.

"The investigation is ongoing, and the source of the contamination has yet to be determined," said Michael Herndon, an FDA spokesman, in an e-mail.

More than 5,000 bags of salad were shipped to stores in eastern Canada as well as Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and other states.

Arizona, Florida program

All the bags of salad in the suspect lot are being collected and are off the market, Ordman said.

"Here you having a voluntary recall of product, and that's really different from an outbreak," said Jim Bogart, president of the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California.

The recall comes as two states consider adopting versions of a new food safety program established in California this spring, called the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement.

The agreement, which those in the salad business join voluntarily, covers more than 100 handlers in California and sets up stricter, unified rules for everything from testing water for pathogens to the types of compost growers may use.

Arizona, where nearly all of California's leafy green production shifts in the winter months, will likely be the next state to adopt a similar program in the next eight weeks, said Paul Simonds, spokesman for Western Growers Association, which has members in California and Arizona.

"Food safety is not something to be taken lightly, and the consumer doesn't recognize when they buy a bag of lettuce whether it's grown in California or New Jersey," Simonds said, advocating for more widespread adoption of marketing agreements.

Scott Horsfall, chief executive officer of the marketing agreement, said Florida has also expressed interest in an agreement for its produce. But Horsfall said enacting such agreements in California and Arizona alone will cover the majority of leafy greens produced in the United States.

On the national level, groups such as Western Growers and the United Fresh Produce Association continue to advocate for a national marketing agreement to cover all states. That agreement would differ from California's, however, because rather than being run by a board of industry members in partnership with state officials, the groups want federal oversight.

Critics of the marketing agreement model agree, saying California's doesn't provide enough government oversight. "This (contamination) shows that the industry rules are not preventing E. coli 0157:H7 recalls or outbreaks in fresh-cut, processed salad," said Judith Redmond, board president of Community Alliance with Family Farmers and a partner at Full Belly Farm in Yolo County. "The industry's measures are ineffective because we don't know exactly how E. coli ... is spreading."

Critics also argue that the marketing agreement model should shift its focus from growers and fields to how processors handle raw produce in salad plants.

"What we do know is that these recalls and outbreaks are not occurring in traditional, fresh leafy greens," Redmond said. "The industry needs to focus their rules on the problem in processed salad, not on leafy greens."

'A complicated time'

California Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, pointed out in a statement Tuesday that despite the industry's new rules, the Canadian government - not leafy greens handlers - uncovered the contamination. Florez also said answers have been slow coming from Dole.

"Here we are, days into a recall impacting the industry and consumers in two nations, and we have only narrowed the source down to three states," he said.

The senator has authored legislation that would require government inspections of leafy greens handlers and would put state health officials in charge of a mandatory food-safety program for the salad industry.

Tom Stenzel, president of United Fresh Produce Association, called Florez's remarks are disingenuous. Even if Florez got his way and passed legislation, Stenzel said, the new laws wouldn't prevent contamination or recalls from occurring.

"This is a complicated time for everybody, and these are tough issues," he said. "The industry is working hard to minimize contamination and continuing that effort."

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