

Alliance targets produce policies

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Small farms that grow traditional leafy greens sold only by the head or the bunch should be exempt from strict new growing and processing guidelines created in the wake of the 2006 spinach E-coli outbreak, a coalition of growers says.

Instead, bagged salads - linked to that outbreak and most of the bacteria-related illnesses involving leafy greens in the past decade - should be the target of new food-safety regulations, the group says.

The Santa Cruz-based Community Alliance with Family Farmers is lobbying to change the rules imposed by the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement and large-scale buyers, such as grocers and food-service companies. The alliance said the new rules threaten the livelihood of small-farm operators and hurt the environment.

"It's just gotten completely out of control," said Judith Redmond, president of CAFF.

Redmond said the regulations are too expensive and impractical for small-scale growers to follow.

CAFF's lobbying campaign is focused on blocking proposals for national regulation of the leafy greens industry.

The regulations are supported by Western Growers Association, a produce industry trade group that helped develop the California marketing agreement. The group says other states' produce companies could gain a competitive advantage if they

didn't have to follow the same food safety rules.

"What we need to see is a level playing field for everybody," said Paul Simonds, a spokesman for Western Growers Association.

But CAFF claims to have deterred Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., from adding an amendment to the Farm Bill that would impose national regulations on leafy greens handlers. Feinstein introduced the amendment, then tabled it earlier this month.

The organization is also campaigning against proposed national regulations on leafy green growers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is accepting public comment on the issue until Dec. 3. The regulations could potentially be mandatory, a step up from the voluntary guidelines established by the California marketing agreement earlier this year.

Environmental concerns

Farmers are distributing thousands of newsletters at farmers markets asking the public to oppose the USDA's proposed regulations, Redmond said. She said CAFF is also working to develop a new set of guidelines better suited to small growers.

Current rules calling for more attention to possible sources of animal and water contamination are doing more harm than good, Redmond said.

For instance, she said, growers have removed vegetation from canal banks to discourage animals from coming close to farms. But the loss of the vegetation strips allows the movement of manure - a known source of E. coli contamination - into and out of streams, Redmond said.

Traditional growers say they're being unfairly lumped together with farmers who process their greens into bagged salad, a step that adds another possible contamination source, plus the opportunity for cross-contamination - spreading bacteria from, say, one bunch of spinach to dozens.

"You're assumed to be part of the problem," said Dale Coke of Coke Farm in Watsonville. "No one's really asking those questions, like: Is it really necessary for all these crops?"

While some growers say increased regulations put an undue burden on small farms that grow a diverse array of crops, industry representatives say the rules are just as tough on big farms.

"It's been work on everybody's part," said Joe Pezzini, vice president of operations for Ocean Mist Farms and chairman of the advisory board for the marketing agreement. He said all growers have a responsibility to make sure their food is safe.

Large farms strained, too

The industry has not yet recovered from a disastrous E. coli outbreak in September 2006, which killed at least three people and sickened more than 200. While health officials eventually traced the source to Dole-brand bagged, fresh spinach grown on the Central Coast, they were unable to pinpoint whether contamination occurred in the field or during processing.

But CAFF says processed salads were involved in 98.5 percent of illness outbreaks linked to leafy greens since 1999. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration in September reported a more conservative estimate: 80 percent of leafy green-related E. coli outbreaks were linked to bagged salad since 1995.

Processing is already regulated by the government, but farms are not, Pezzini said.

"For the industry to regain consumer confidence, we had to say that on the farm, we will do our part," he said.

Farmers are also under pressure from buyers, who add their own regulations on top of those proposed by the industry. An August survey from the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County reported that 15 percent of growers surveyed had removed environmental practices in response to buyers' safety concerns.

These "bigger and better regulations" are a source of concern for large farms as well as small ones, Pezzini said.

"If they're being pushed upon the industry because of fear of litigation, that's not the way to make standards," he said.

Even small growers who don't support a USDA national agreement for leafy greens say it could

prevent individual buyers' regulations from escalating out of control.

"We would like to see a ceiling on the requirements," said Jo Ann Baumgartner, director of the Wild Farm Alliance in Watsonville.