

November 29, 2007

# USDA considering first-ever leafy greens regulations

## Santa Cruz Sentinel

**JANE LIAW**

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

In the wake of E. coli outbreaks linked to contaminated spinach last fall, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is considering first-ever national safety regulations for leafy green vegetables.

"We're asking the public if there should be some type of regulatory tool to assist industry in insuring the safety of leafy green vegetable products," said Michael Durando of the USDA.

The E. coli outbreak that was traced to Salinas Valley farms and blamed for three deaths and 200 people getting sick was a trigger for action, Durando said.

One option on the table is a national version of the industry-developed standards that followed the E. coli outbreak and now govern California farmers and leafy green handlers. Though some farmers in Santa Cruz County are unhappy about the regulations, most support national standards.

"We'd get a uniform set of food safety standards. Nothing wrong with that," said Michael Dobler of Dobler & Sons in Watsonville, who believes that everyone should be held to the standards he already embraces.

The USDA is considering both voluntary and mandatory standards, officials say, but favors a voluntary program that allows flexibility.

Leafy greens make up a substantial portion of Santa Cruz County's agricultural output. Lettuces alone brought in almost \$20 million to the county last year.

Sales dropped 80 to 90 percent for spinach after the E. coli outbreak, said Dick Peixoto, owner of Lakeside Organic Gardens in Watsonville.

"They've bounced back some" but not completely, he said.

### SEND YOUR COMMENTS

The public is invited to send USDA comments by Dec. 3 to Docket Clerk, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Ave. SW, STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237 or e-mail to [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov) Reference docket No. AMS-FV-07-0090

This February, the state leafy greens industry created the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement, designed to insure safe food practices by handlers, including grocers and food-service companies. Federal regulatory agencies had concluded that the E. coli contamination may have originated during the production process.

Once handlers have signed the agreement, they are legally obligated to follow the standards.

To date, 118 companies have signed on, or about 99 percent of the industry, according to Hank Giclas, vice president of science and technology at Western Growers Association. WGA is an industry trade group that helped create the agreement.

Safety precautions covered by the agreement include testing the water supply monthly for E. coli and keeping animals off farmland.

Judith Redmond, president of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, however, says there are problems with the current standards.

CAFF has a strong Santa Cruz County presence.

Though the agreement is signed by handlers, farmers who do not follow its stipulations cannot sell to the handlers, essentially making it mandatory, said Redmond.

"We should look at E. coli as a public health issue and not a dirty farm issue," said Redmond.

Rules should not vary from crop to crop, since farmers grow many crops, she said, and protecting farmland from animals is not practical. Whole vegetables and freshcut bagged vegetables have different E. coli risks and should be regulated differently, she said.

CAFF has submitted comments to the USDA regarding possible national regulations, said Redmond.

Local farmer Peixoto agrees that a voluntary national program would be good, as national chains would have to step up to the plate. However, he shares CAFF's reservations about the existing California agreement. "Farmers can't ride horses around ranch roads, even though no E. coli has been associated with horses. We're protecting ourselves from things that don't exist."

Not every family farmer is opposed to the California rules. "There should be a minimum standard whether it goes to a processing shed or in a box with 23 of its brethren," said Dobler.