



*Cultivating healthy farms,  
food & communities*

PO Box 363, Davis, CA 95617  
(530) 756-8518 Fax: (530) 756-7857  
Web site: www.caff.org

**Mission:** CAFF is building a movement of rural and urban people to foster family-scale agriculture that cares for the land, sustains local economies and promotes social justice.

**The Agrarian Advocate/Farmer to Farmer** is the quarterly publication of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers.

**Agrarian:** 1. Relating to land or to the ownership or division of land. 2. Of agriculture or farmers generally. [From the Latin *ager*: a field or country]

CAFF is a nonprofit membership organization. Members are part of an active, effective voice for CAFF's mission. Benefits of membership: subscription to this newsletter, voting privileges and timely updates on CAFF activities. Membership levels are: \$20 Student, \$50 Basic, \$250 Gardener, \$500 Tiller, \$1,000 Steward.

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### CAFF Contacts

#### Bay Area Office

Temra Costa, *Buy Fresh Buy Local* Campaign  
Program Manager . . . . . (510) 832-4625

#### Central Coast

Sam Earnshaw, Regional Coordinator . . . . . (831) 722-5556  
Marisol Asselta, *Buy Fresh Buy Local* Campaign . . (831) 761-8507  
Ildi Carlisle-Cummins, Farm to School Coordinator . (831) 761-8507

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Michele Wyler, Farm-to-School Coordinator . . . . (707) 445-3166

#### Sacramento Valley

Kristen Schroer . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x39

#### San Joaquin Valley

Matt Valdin, Sustainable Cotton Project . . . . . (559) 430-7020

#### Davis Office

Dave Runsten, Executive Director . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x25  
Mark Cady, Biological Agriculture . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x20  
Anya Fernald, Community Food Systems . . . (530) 756-8518 x31  
Marcia Gibbs, Sustainable Cotton Project . . . (530) 756-8518 x34  
Katherine Noble-Goodman, Bio-Ag Program Administration  
and Development Coordinator . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x26  
Heidi O'Guinn, Controller . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x19  
Joy Rowe, Membership . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x17

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Managing Editor . . . . . Dawn Van Dyke  
Associate Editor . . . . . Klara Rice  
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## Food Safety and Sustainable Agriculture

BY DAVE RUNSTEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As I write this in early December, the days are growing shorter and the nights colder, and some much-needed rest for farmers approaches. The hired representatives of some groups of farmers are not resting, however, they are busy coming up with “solutions” for the *E. coli* 0157:H7 outbreak in Salinas spinach.

I approach this topic with a certain dread, because throughout the history of American agriculture, government-mandated food safety requirements have often made life difficult, if not impossible, for small family farmers. The loss of the ability to easily sell livestock products from the farm contributed to the decline of the diversified family farm and the rise of the enormous monocultures we see in the Midwest.

*E. coli* are everywhere and most are not a health problem. It is only certain mutant strains that make people ill, such as the one in the recent spinach case, *E. coli* 0157:H7, which is a combination of e-coli and a bacterial virus (from shigella bacteria). It is the shiga-like toxin produced by 0156:H7 that can harm or even kill you. *E. coli* 0157:H7 was first seen in the early 1980s in dairy cows, determined to be dangerous in the late 1980s, and then produced the Jack in the Box crisis of undercooked hamburgers of 1993. Where did it come from? No one knows. Perhaps as many as 100,000 people per year fall ill from these bacteria in the United States, most from meat, but an increasing number from vegetables.

Heat will kill it. Just as we heat up milk (pasteurization) to kill bacteria, so we now spray meat carcasses with steam and hot water for the same purpose, or we cook the hamburgers to well done. However, this is not really feasible with lettuce or spinach—or is it? *E. coli* O157:H7 in spinach can be killed by cooking at 160° Fahrenheit for 15 seconds. In most poorer countries, vegetables are cooked or pickled because of the danger of eating them raw.

Many people have been blaming the industrial food system for this *E. coli* outbreak. It appears to be a fact that if you feed grain to ruminants you increase the *E. coli* in their intestinal tracts by three orders of magnitude. Some studies of cattle have found as many as 58% contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7. Since the bacteria live in animals, it is easy to see how meat can become contaminated in the slaughter process. But how does it get onto the vegetables? Apparently there are many possible ways, including cattle manure contaminating irrigation water, and sprinkling such contaminated water directly on the plants is the most likely source of the recent contamination.

Some have blamed wildlife for transporting the bacteria onto the spinach or being contaminated with it themselves. However, an excellent research summary from the Monterey County RCD notes that scientific studies have shown that only about 1% of wildlife carry any bacteria pathogenic for humans. So while it is possible that ANY farm could become contaminated with dangerous *E. coli* in this way—in fact flies could transport it—the probability that it is caused by wildlife is very low.

Already some commodity groups are calling for producers to rip out any habitat that might harbor animals. CAFF has been planting hedgerows and grassed waterways in an effort to increase species diversity and slow runoff on farms. Will this effort now be deemed risky and made illegal because it conflicts with the idea of “clean fields”? In fact, some studies show that these filtration mechanisms may actually reduce the levels of pathogens. And will food safety rules be devised that will be too expensive for small farmers to undertake?

Many farmers are still installing habitat throughout the state, including vegetable

See **Food Safety** continued on page 7

**Farmer Profile** continued from page 3  
 Farm and Mercantile in Castroville. He also began the process of forming his own subscription box service, also known as “Community Supported Agriculture” (CSA). Every Friday, Juan delivers as many as 45 boxes to homes in Carmel, Pacific Grove, Watsonville, Seaside, and Salinas. Some members get a box every week, others biweekly, and some just once a month. “I’m flexible,” he explains.

Both Juan and his members value the personal interaction the CSA provides.

“I get to meet them—they’re very happy about this produce coming to their door.” Members tell him what they liked best in previous boxes and share how they prepared their produce, and every week Juan tucks a newsletter containing simple recipes as well as a brief farm update into each box. It’s different than going to the store, Perez asserts, where fruits and vegetables “could be imported from who knows where...My customers like that it’s grown locally.”

Juan relies primarily on word-of-mouth advertising to promote his CSA program, although he does post information on the California State University Monterey Bay campus. He’s a senior there this year, majoring in Earth Systems Science and Policy with a thematic focus on Science and Social Justice. Slated to graduate in May, Juan anticipates expanding his acreage and applying his educational experience to the practice of sustainable farming. “I’ve been talking to my parents and the thing is, we want to buy our own farm—I don’t know how many acres—and raise chickens, cows, pigs, and have orchards—apple trees, peaches, and pears. I can see that happening in a couple years.”

Attending Terra Madre in October enhanced Juan’s understanding of sustainable agriculture and the greater food community. “It was my first time out of the country,” he says. “I met a lot of people from Spain, from Norway, from Cuba, from Peru, from Brazil, from Africa. It was great to get that experience, talking about other peoples’ culture, what they do, how they farm.” Juan participated in workshops on soil and water conservation, animal husbandry, and marketing. Overall, Juan says, Terra Madre taught him to “appreciate...life, conserve the land. Every year people are taking it away to put cement over it and it’s going to stay there for I don’t know how long.” Juan feels a strong responsibility to “try to protect this land, this environment we’re at.”

“I know I’m not going to do a lot,” he says, “but...it will make a little bit of difference.” ■



Juan Perez and his father operate an organic farm in Salinas.

The *Buy Fresh, Buy Local* program aims to raise the visibility of agriculture within the county, and ultimately improve the economic viability of agricultural growers and producers. Growers such as those involved in Harvest Time (a group of 38 u-pick and direct marketing growers) face increasing developmental pressures, and *Buy Fresh, Buy Local* provides a lynchpin for discussions around the future and potential of the agricultural community. Brentwood-Contra Costa county is a leader in expanding our Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign and will be part of our planning

process for upcoming work in the Bay Area, which is comprised of a nine-county region including San Francisco, Marin, Sonoma, Napa, Solano, Contra Costa, Alameda, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

In collaboration with the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust (BALT), The Contra Costa Wine Grape and Olive Growers Association, and Harvest Time, of Brentwood. Check out our *Online Local Food Guide* for the list of participating farmers from this historically agriculture-rich community. ■

**For more information:**

Online local food guide—[www.buylocalca.org](http://www.buylocalca.org)

BALT—[www.brentwoodaglandtrust.org](http://www.brentwoodaglandtrust.org);

Harvest Time—[www.harvest4you.com](http://www.harvest4you.com)

**Food Safety** continued from page 2

farmers. Of our current list of 40 farmers slated for hedgerows, only two have shown some hesitancy, saying they want to wait until the dust settles. In reality, the attention that will be focused on this issue has the potential to strengthen farmers’ interest in installing habitat and increasing biodiversity. As scientific research continues to show the low risk plus the benefits of habitat plantings, more growers will feel confident to have them on their farms.

The population of bacteria doubles every hour on spinach at room temperature. This makes me wonder if those bags in the industrial system are really a hothouse for bacteria when they are not kept cold enough. Many people just dump the bags into a bowl without further washing them. Of course it only takes 10 bacteria to make you sick. In any case, since *E. coli* multiplies, the sooner you buy and eat the produce the better. Buy Local! 🌱

**Resources:**

Radio interview with two researchers: [www.metrofarm.com/mf\\_Food\\_Chain\\_Radio.php](http://www.metrofarm.com/mf_Food_Chain_Radio.php), (select show #519 on *E. coli*).

Diana Stuart, Reconciling Food Safety and Environmental Protection: A Literature Review. Salinas: Monterey County Resource Conservation District. October 2006.

**A Summary of above:**

Diana Stuart, Carol Shennan, and Martha Brown, Food Safety versus Environmental Protection on the Central California Coast: Exploring the Science behind an Apparent Conflict. Santa Cruz: UC Santa Cruz Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems Research Brief #10. Fall 2006.

## Buy Fresh Buy Local Roll Out in Brentwood and Contra Costa

by Anya Fernald

The Community Alliance with Family Farmers rolled out the new Buy Fresh, Buy Local label for the Brentwood and greater Contra Costa farming community on September 18. The program commences with 17 farmer partners and one retail partner—Raley’s, of Brentwood.