

# Growers talk food safety

## *Forum in Salinas targets changes, solutions*

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Salinas Valley agricultural leaders must have a comprehensive plan to address food safety in the wake of last fall's E. coli outbreak, state and federal food safety officials said Tuesday during a daylong forum in Salinas.

More than 100 regional lettuce and leafy greens growers, trade-group and government representatives met to discuss the latest news from investigations into September's spinach-linked E. coli outbreak, research progress and future initiatives.

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"I took the tone today as being very positive and upbeat, with a commitment to make changes in how we handle food safety," said Jeff Farrar, chief of the Food and Drug Branch of the California Department of Health Services. The meeting was closed to reporters.

The forum, held at the Salinas Community Center on North Main Street, was sponsored by the Western Institute for Food Safety and Security, based in Davis.

Jim Gorny, United Fresh Produce Association's vice president of quality assurance and technology, said his group would like to see nationwide food safety rules.

"I think today went very well," said Robert Brackett, director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, after the meeting. "There is a lot of interest and motivation to continue addressing the need for increased food safety."

Representatives from the FDA talked to growers about progress the agency has made since it launched its leafy greens initiative last August, which has FDA officials inspecting Monterey County farms and processing plants.

So far, they haven't uncovered any violations, said Jim Bogart, president of the Salinas-based Grower-Shipper Association of the Central Coast.

Both the FDA and state DHS are pleased with the agricultural industry's move to improve food safety through a marketing agreement, Bogart said.

"They are supportive of the efforts industry has undertaken," he said.

Approved Feb. 7 by the California Department of Food and Agriculture, the agreement requires growers of leafy greens to test water and soil more frequently than they used to and follow stricter safety guidelines. Participating handlers would not be allowed to do business with growers who do not pass state inspections. Handlers must also maintain a system allowing them to trace the sources of their products.

As of Tuesday, about 94 percent of California's leafy greens companies had signed up for the new rules.

"At the FDA, we're happy to see anything that pushes safety," Brackett said of the agreement.

The FDA is expected to issue a report on September's outbreak in the near future, but a date was not available Tuesday, officials said.

"The one thing that we want people to take away from today is that there is no one thing that can cause an outbreak like the one here," Brackett said. "We need to have a true farm-to-table approach to address food safety."

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