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## **Grower details his side of outbreak link** ***'We're part of a bigger story,' Mission Organics executive says***

By DAWN WITHERS

PAICINES - Nestled in a picturesque San Benito County valley lies a field federal and state authorities say may be the source of E. coli that last summer sickened more than 200 people, killed at least four and inflicted long-term damage on the Salinas-area produce industry.

The 50.9-acre plot at Paicines Ranch lies along Cienega Road near the rural hamlet from which the ranch takes its name. Farmed by Otto Kramm, Mission Organics' chief operating officer, it's so far the only field that has been publicly identified as a source of the specific strain of E. coli O157:H7 found among contaminated bags of spinach.

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Three other, unidentified ranches in San Benito and Monterey counties have been investigated and found to have strains of E. coli linked to the outbreak, federal and state health inspectors have said. Kramm agreed to speak publicly about the situation for the first time with The Salinas Californian, saying this week he wanted to counter speculation about the property, his company and its connection to the September outbreak.

Being at the center of the investigation that rocked his industry has taken at least a small personal toll, Kramm said, though he also downplays it.

"When you're part of a group and you're singled out, yeah, it's uncomfortable," he said, "not just to me but to my employees."

Mission Organics farms 3,200 acres on the Central Coast, with nearly the same acreage in other parts of California, Kramm said. Everything the company grows is supplied directly to Natural Selection Foods in San Juan

Bautista, where the contaminated spinach was processed and bagged, he said. Mission Organics started its growing operations on the Paicines Ranch in December 2005, Kramm said, and is in the second of three years required to transition to organic farming, as defined by federal

regulations. "We're part of a bigger story, part of a bigger picture," Kramm said Wednesday.

The outbreak led the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to issue an unprecedented blanket warning Sept. 14 advising consumers to avoid eating any fresh spinach. The advisory remained in effect for nearly two weeks. Some 34 brands of spinach bagged by Natural Selection Foods were recalled, although in the end, all the contaminated spinach that investigators recovered from infected people carried the Dole label.

The FDA warning and subsequent investigation into the source of the outbreak brought the fresh spinach industry to a halt, causing crops to be plowed under and shattering consumer confidence in all types of leafy greens.

## **Tracing pigs' footsteps**

The field at the heart of the spinach investigation sits in a classically bucolic setting, surrounded by rolling hills, trees, vineyards - and pastures of grazing cattle.

The presence of cattle is what links all four farms investigated by the FDA, because cattle feces are a common source of *E. coli* O157:H7, the bacterial type that caused last summer's deadly outbreak.

David Acheson, chief medical officer for food safety at the FDA, said Friday he doesn't know exactly how the spinach became contaminated.

"We can't rule out the possibility the contaminated spinach came from more than one place," Acheson said. The FDA's final report is due out soon, though Acheson said he didn't know when.

The Paicines area also is home to wild pigs, which traverse the Mission Organics ranch, break fences and root around for food. Officials with the FDA and the California Department of Health Services speculate pigs may have been a possible source or mode of transporting *E. coli*-laden feces to the spinach crop, but Acheson said that's not known for sure.

In Kramm's view, one suspected factor - the presence of pigs - should be discounted at Paicines Ranch.

Showing where pigs have damaged fencing built along two sides of the

ranch, he said evidence shows pigs headed south toward neighboring vineyards and likely never set foot on the parcel where his spinach was growing last August.

No tracks were found near spinach, Kramm said.

Pigs are drawn to those vineyards because they like to eat grapes, he said, and haven't ever caused much damage to his crops.

"I agree pigs ran through the ranch," Kramm said, "but they didn't run through the spinach field."

But to ensure maximum protection against wild pig intrusion and any possible contamination, he said, he plans to install a perimeter fence around the entire 450 acres he leases on Paicines Ranch, at a cost of \$80,000.

On a drive through the Salinas Valley, Kramm said the topography in some places is the same as that in the valley he farms, with cattle operations adjacent to crops. He contends his ranch is no more vulnerable to E. coli contamination than other operations in the greater Salinas growing area.

"Even though geographically we're not in the Salinas Valley, it's the Salinas deal," he said, referring to the common culture of the companies he works with. "Salinas Valley shippers are the ones taking the product and shipping the product."

## **Pointing fingers elsewhere**

While the ranch's terrain isn't unique, the presence of cattle, wild pigs, a retention pond and runoff all increase the risk of contamination, said Trevor Suslow, a University of California, Davis, professor and food pathogens researcher who visited Paicines Ranch after the outbreak.

"There are certain risk factors around that ranch," Suslow said, "but they are not so distinct that someone could have said, 'There is no way you could have made a decision to grow here.'"

Though the FDA and state health officials believe three other farms could also be possible sources of the bacteria, cow pastures near Paicines Ranch yielded E. coli that was a genetic match to the outbreak strain. However, no positive samples were found on Kramm's crops or fields.

The 2.8 acres, or about 16,000 pounds, of spinach that Kramm supplied to Natural Selection Foods to be bagged on Aug. 15 - the day the contaminated greens were processed, investigators say - was a small fraction of the vegetable that passed through the San Juan Bautista processing facility that day. The plant processes about 2 million pounds of leafy greens each week.

A Salinas High School graduate, Kramm, 48, said in 1996 he left the world of conventional farming for organic. He co-founded Mission Organics with Mission Ranches and Earthbound Farm Inc., which owns Natural Selection Foods and is the largest organic label in the United States.

He said he believes his company has been singled out as a defendant in pending lawsuits by outbreak victims because of how much insurance he carries.

Kramm said he's insured for several times more than the average grower's policy of \$5 million, but declined to state the actual amount on the record. He took out his current insurance in December 2001, he said, because he was fearful after the Sept. 11 attacks that the U.S. food supply chain might become an attractive target for terrorists. But both Kramm's lawyer, Brad Sullivan of Salinas-based Lombardo and Gilles, and Bill Marler, the Seattle-based attorney representing 93 people sickened in the outbreak, said the amount of Kramm's insurance has nothing to do with Mission Organics being named as a defendant.

Both lawyers said Marler was required to name Mission Organics in the suit once he learned its name and the location of the genetically matched E. coli.

"It's beside the point which farm it is," Marler said.

### **'Wrong place, wrong time'**

Kramm was in the "wrong place at the wrong time," Marler said, adding that because food-borne illness is a threat to the entire leafy greens industry, every company has cause for concern - especially because other strains of E. coli O157:H7 were found in bags of Dole-brand spinach.

Ultimately, he said, Dole is responsible for the outbreak because its name was on the bags of contaminated spinach.

"It's Dole's problem," Marler said.

Dole Fresh Vegetables president Eric Schwartz was unavailable for comment Friday.

But Sullivan said cow pastures where the genetically matched E. coli sample was found are more than a mile from where Kramm grew the suspect spinach. Also, Sullivan said, the samples were collected more than two months after the spinach was harvested and new cover crops planted.

Kramm said that since the outbreak, Natural Selection Foods has reduced its orders for spinach from him, but he said he the company has said it will not end its partnership with Mission Organics.

Samantha Cabaluna, a spokeswoman for Natural Selection Foods, said she is not aware of any changes to Earthbound Farm Inc.'s relationship to Mission Organics. Cabaluna said she didn't know if the orders for spinach or other leafy greens from Mission Organics have been reduced.

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