



# CALIFORNIA FARM BUREAU FEDERATION

## Farmers focus on steps to rebuild consumer trust

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By Kate Campbell  
Assistant Editor

As investigation continues into the cause of E. coli contamination of spinach, growers say the impact of the event is far from over. With the two-week ban on spinach lifted on Sept. 29, there's little consumer demand for a commodity traditionally recognized for its outstanding nutritional values.

In Monterey and San Benito counties, where about 90 percent of the state's spinach is grown, farmers are feeling some relief that investigators have narrowed the search and lifted the blanket ban on all fresh spinach. They are, however, uncertain about the best course for harvest given a wary market.



"There are new developments every day that affect decisions about our spinach crop," said San Benito County vegetable grower Richard Silva. "For instance, I'm looking at a field where we actually had an order for 25 pallets of baby spinach. But they haven't started cutting and I'm not sure that order still stands. I have to confirm."

He said the spinach order he got on Oct. 7--a Saturday--is the only one he has gotten since the ban went into effect Sept. 14.

"In our growing operation we participate in different aspects of the growing, harvesting, marketing chain," said Silva, who is vice president of the San Benito County Farm Bureau. "This is really some good looking spinach here. Beautiful stuff."

He said it's discouraging to turn on the TV news every day and find there's some other agricultural crop in question, whether it's spinach or green leaf lettuce. And, he said he understands how consumers' appetites can be softened for any type of farm-fresh product.

"This is not allowing consumer confidence to come back," Silva said. "Trust is always won a step at a time. It can't be done in a large swoop. American consumers need to know we're doing everything we can to make sure our product is safe. We're out making sure every crop that leaves our ranches has been checked and double-checked to make sure our water source is not an issue."

The fresh market has yet to show signs of recovery due to lack of consumer demand. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Market News, which tracks sales at the nation's fresh produce terminals, showed few if any spinach sales last week from any state or nation.

Like farmers throughout the Central Coast, Salinas farmer Dirk Giannini said growers are ramping up food safety programs, including testing and retesting all wells and reservoirs.

"We've tested for a wide spectrum of potential contaminants and now we're really going after the E. coli bacterium," Giannini said. "We've really raised the bar on our food safety standards in the field."

He said the fresh produce market doesn't seem to be moving yet, but he remains optimistic that he will be able to sell at least some of his spinach crop.

Growers say that in some cases fields will be disked under, in other cases mature product will be shifted to frozen spinach processors and canners, but how much can be put to that purpose is still unknown.

The announcement by the Food and Drug Administration that they've narrowed the search for the source of the contamination in spinach is "a good first step on the road to recovery for consumers and for family farmers and ranchers who grow the crop," said Santa Barbara farmer Doug Mosebar, president of the California Farm Bureau Federation.

Mosebar went into spinach fields with Central Coast growers on Sept. 29 to see firsthand local growing practices and harvest operations. He also provided local farmers with an update on efforts to ensure effective food safety procedures and outlined steps to begin rebuilding the market for fresh spinach.

He emphasized Farm Bureau continues to work very closely with the governor's office, the California Department of Health Services, federal agencies, scientists, agricultural associations and growers to help find answers to the contamination problem so it can be prevented from happening again.

"Food safety is our top priority," Mosebar said. "We're committed to providing safe, nutritious food that families, including our own, can consume in confidence. We'll be working in the months ahead to get our customers back and strengthen our already stringent food safety procedures--both in the fields and in the processing and packaging areas."

Mosebar said CFBF is sharing information with other agricultural associations and reviewing interim procedures for the restart of harvest and packing, as well as looking at all steps in the supply chain to develop long-term procedures that give everyone--consumers, retail and wholesale handlers of agricultural products, and farmers themselves--confidence in the safety and wholesomeness of the nation's food supply.

"We're taking a coordinated and multifaceted approach to regaining consumer trust," Mosebar said. "And, we will not rest until we've achieved a level of confidence in the effectiveness of proposed changes to food safety procedures to ensure they will protect American families and provide the highest level of food safety on California farms."

With an estimated 31,000 acres planted to spinach, California produces 74 percent of the fresh spinach grown in the United States. It grows 67 percent of the processing spinach, which is sold frozen or canned.

California Food and Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura, speaking Oct. 4 to the Fresh Produce & Floral Council, said the crisis has left the produce industry with the task of rebuilding consumer confidence in packaged spinach, as well as maintaining confidence in other fresh-cut and bagged products.

The Packer, a produce sector news publication, said Kawamura credited the relatively new "PulseNet" technology coordinated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for helping quickly locate and test 13 bags of contaminated spinach from diverse locations and then narrow the source to a single lot or two.

Nonetheless, he said, "We're still going to have a lot of work to do. The industry needs to be prepared for such crises by developing 'message mapping' and creating plans of action to deal with crises and control consumer perception."

CDFA, the FDA, the CDC and the U.S. Department of Agriculture continue to investigate the cause of this outbreak, Kawamura said, including continued inspections and sample collection in facilities, the environment and water, as well as studies of animal management, water use and the environment.

In a prepared statement, the FDA said, "The agency and the state of California have previously expressed serious concern with the continuing outbreaks of food-borne illness associated with consumption of fresh and fresh-cut lettuce and other leafy greens. After discussions with industry, FDA and the state of California, as part of a longer-term strategy, now expect industry to develop a plan to minimize the risk of another outbreak due to E. coli O157:H7 in all leafy greens, including lettuce."

Meanwhile, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of California announced that agents of the FBI and FDA Office of Criminal Investigations executed two search warrants Oct. 4 on a produce processor in Salinas and one in San Juan Bautista in connection with the E. coli O157:H7 outbreak.

"FDA continues to work with the U.S. Attorney's Office and the FBI to determine the facts behind this outbreak," said Robert Brackett, director of the FDA Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

Commenting on the search, U.S. Attorney Kevin V. Ryan said, "I want to reassure the public that there is no indication in this investigation that leaf spinach was deliberately or intentionally contaminated.

"We are investigating allegations that certain spinach growers and distributors may not have taken all necessary or appropriate steps to ensure that their spinach was safe before it was placed into interstate commerce. Moreover, the investigation has not revealed any evidence of a new or continuing threat to public health in connection with the matters under investigation."

With the investigation continuing and research narrowing the focus on the cause of the contamination, both farmers and consumers now wonder how to rebuild confidence in the safety of an increasingly important source of good nutrition.

On average, Americans eat 3 pounds of spinach a year, according to the USDA, including 2 pounds of fresh spinach and 1 pound of processed. Consumption has risen steadily in the past five years, especially for fresh spinach.

In a separate action, the Salinas-based Nunes Co. Inc. has voluntarily recalled its "green leaf lettuce" sold under the Foxy brand. The lettuce was harvested from one farm and shipped between Oct. 3 and Oct. 6.

The company took the precautionary step based on the recent spinach contamination events and a concern for consumer safety. The recall was prompted by a finding of E. coli in a secondary irrigation water source.

The FDA commended the Nunes Co. for its prompt action, stating that "it is better to be cautious than to potentially put consumers at risk of contracting a serious food-borne illness."

No other products of the Nunes Co., or Foxy brand products, are part of the recall. No illnesses have been reported. Samples of the recalled product are now being tested.

*(Kate Campbell is a reporter for Ag Alert. She may be contacted at [kcampbell@cfbf.com](mailto:kcampbell@cfbf.com).)*

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