

New worry for farmers

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Wednesday, February 21, 2007



Food is big news -- not just the latest trends in salumi-making or buzz about which chef has left town for New York, but also the business practices that are less visible but just as crucial to what we eat.

Among recent developments, family farmers are worried about new rules designed to stop E. coli 0157 outbreaks; meat and milk from cloned animals is closer to market; and two new court rulings have come down on genetically engineered crops.

The details:

Strict rules burden farms

Family farmers who fill Bay Area markets and CSA boxes with spinach, lettuce and kale are concerned that Big Ag and regulators aren't taking them into account in adopting new rules aimed at preventing more E. coli problems and restoring consumer confidence in California-grown leafy greens.

"I've had so many calls from farmers, saying this is going to change our way of life," says Judith Redmond of Full Belly Farm in the Capay Valley. She's also president of the board of the Community Alliance for Family Farmers (CAFF), whose members number a couple of thousand small and mid-size farms.

Ever since Salinas Valley bagged baby spinach tainted with lethal E. coli 0157 sickened more than 200 people and killed three in September, the pressure's been on California growers. Consumers are still buying less spinach than they used to.

Legislators have introduced bills that would, among other things, put the Department of Health Services in charge of the fields. Food safety watchdogs are pushing for even stronger regulations. And stores that sell produce are talking about setting their own growing standards.

To fend off stricter rules, California's biggest growers moved quickly to regulate themselves, under state supervision.

Shippers, processors and wholesalers -- called handlers -- who agree to buy leafy greens only from growers who meet certain standards would be able to put a special seal on their boxes and bags. Mainly, the proposed standards require a lot of testing for E. coli in crops, irrigation water, and manure and other soil amendments; and the creation of buffer zones between fields and waterways and trees and shrubs that

attract wildlife.

The voluntary rules would cover all kinds of leafy greens -- from spring mix and baby lettuces to kale, cabbage and arugula. Companies handling some 90 percent of the state's leafy greens have already signed on, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

If, as expected, the rules are made mandatory by next winter or spring, they'd cover every greens grower in the state, from giants like Earthbound's Natural Selection brand, whose spinach caused last year's outbreak, to small farms like Full Belly in the Capay Valley near Vacaville.

"If you go feed your cow, are you going to have to take your shoes off when you go to your field?" Full Belly's Redmond asks. "People who have a sheep or cow or dog feel they can't have their animals on the farm."

CAFF farmers are all for food safety, she's quick to emphasize. But CAFF thinks the regulations are like using a cluster bomb where a well-aimed rifle would do the job.

"We feel the regulations should be focused on the greatest risks, and they're not," she says. "A lot of us think it's probably about bagged lettuce. Why not focus on those products?"

Testing for E. coli is expensive, turns up many false positives, and doesn't differentiate between the many benign strains and the few lethal ones, she says. And destroying wildlife habitat runs counter to everything that sustainable farms are doing to encourage a healthy environment, she adds.

CAFF member Ken Kimes, a Watsonville-area sprouts farmer who had to adapt to new regulations after E. coli hit sprouts in the 1990s, says the minefields are many and the learning curve steep. He saw the rules drive fellow sprout farmers out of business -- not because of E. coli problems, but because false positives made doing business impossible.

"I think the answer is prevention," Kimes says. "The really basic, obvious things -- don't spread raw manure around."

Redmond contends no one wants to address the vast quantities of cattle manure, a major source of E. coli 0157, being generated by California's crowded feedlots and dairies. Conventional farms use raw manure as a fertilizer; organic farms can use only composted manure.

In any case, the rules are here -- and more may be on the way, depending on what the Legislature does.

The Western Growers Association sees the farmers' concerns as a sign that its standards have teeth.

"When you get to reality on any kind of step like this, everyone is going to be unhappy about everything -- legislators, small farmers, big farmers, consumers," says association spokesman Tim Chelling. "But you're going to have something in place."

Cloning concerns

April 2 is the deadline for public comments on whether meat and milk from cloned cows, pigs and goats should go on the market. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has declared them as safe as regular meat and milk, and said it has no plans to recommend that they be labeled.

Comments can be submitted via www.fda.gov (follow "animal cloning" links) or by mail to Division of Dockets Management (HFA-305), Food and Drug Administration, 5630 Fishers Lane, Rm. 1061, Rockville, MD, 20852. Comments should include the docket number 2003N-0573.

Can meat and milk from cloned animals be organic? The U.S. Department of Agriculture says no. But the agency is still undecided whether to allow the progeny of cloned animals to be sold as organic. More information is posted online at www.ams.usda.gov/nop/TodaysNews.html.

Genetic engineering

Court rulings in San Francisco and Washington, D.C., this month have criticized the USDA for not fully considering the environmental effects of allowing the planting of Monsanto alfalfa and bentgrass that have been genetically modified to be herbicide-resistant.

Both rulings came in cases filed by the Washington-based Center for Food Safety. They turned on concerns that genetically engineered crops can spread into non-GMO grasslands and alfalfa fields.

The effect of the rulings on the growing use of genetically engineered alfalfa and bentgrass was not immediately known.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/02/21/FDGIJO5I9N1.DTL>

This article appeared on page **F - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle



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