

# Sterile farming adds to food risk

By LEN RICHARDSON

**T**HE conference "Food Safety Gone Astray: The Misguided War on Wildlife" addressed why growers are removing wildlife habitat that, in scientific and actual fact, protects food safety. The Wild Farm Alliance event was held at Fort Mason in San Francisco in November.

The "war on wildlife" intensified after the Food and Drug Administration's recall of all bagged and bunched spinach in 2006. Marketing strategies developed on the perception that sterile farming protects the consumer, provoking farmers to put up fences, use wildlife poison and traps, and remove habitat.

## Bagged leafy greens

"Bagged, fresh-cut leafy greens are a mixed bag," said Jo Ann Baumgartner, director of WFA. "Before the 2006 contamination, processors were mainly concerned with the public relations problem of wildlife parts in bags of leafy greens that are shaved from within inches of the ground."

"Once the spinach crisis occurred," Baumgartner continued, "the scrutiny of wildlife was amplified to take the focus off a risky product."

"The fact is, the bag itself is a micro-

## Key Points

- Wild Farm Alliance says wildlife habitat, contrary to perception, guards food safety.
- Supermetrics require sterile buffers between crops and habitat.
- Studies show that grass buffers filter 99% of pathogens.

incubator," added Dave Runsten, director, Community Alliance with Family Farmers. "Many cut-leaf surfaces increase areas of infection, and washing of thousands of pounds of greens at a time can spread pathogens." Runsten noted that 17 out of 26 outbreaks known to the FDA and Centers for Disease Control between 1993 and 2008 were traced to the fresh-cut leafy green (bagged) industry.

## Marketing food safety

The Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement, known as the LGMA, was born to market safe greens and boost sales. The LGMA has helped though issues remain, such as it can require habitat removal and still lists deer as animals of significant risk — with not enough data to back that up, conference speakers asserted. Even so, the LGMA is considered far better than other food safety requirements because it is



**HABITAT DESTROYED:** When the aerial photo at left is examined closely, piles of wood like those in the top photo can be seen pushed back along the edge of the existing vegetation. These trees only months earlier formed a mature multilayered, diverse forest that supported insect-eating songbirds, rodent-eating hawks and other wildlife.

transparent and has shown it will make changes.

WFA says the Supermetrics go beyond the LGMA metrics and are causing the problems. "The Supermetrics require sterile ground buffers of up to 450 feet between crops and habitat," said Baumgartner. "The Supermetrics have little regard for laws protecting habitat, endangered species, water quality, and in the case of federal organic rule, require farmers to maintain or improve water, wetlands, woodlands and wildlife."

University of California Santa Cruz doctoral candidate Diana Stuart reported on a survey documenting how a large percentage of Monterey Bay farmers managing 140,000 acres are being forced by buyers to use fences, poison and traps to eliminate wildlife and take out habitat.

However, cattle are ignored when, according to Stuart, "they are the top known *E. coli* reservoir. From 2% to 50% of herds studied carry *E. coli* O157:H7." She also pointed out that "unlike native wildlife, feral pigs are a problem and should be hunted and trapped since they do not have natural predators."

## Natural filters

"Studies demonstrate that small grass buffers can filter 99% of pathogens, and over 40 field trials show that vegetated treatment systems and constructed

wetlands can treat human pathogens," said Danny Marquis, resource conservationist, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Terry Palmisano, wildlife biologist, California Department of Fish and Game, said her agency "is concerned about the habitat destruction and loss of wildlife due to food safety requirements of the Supermetrics." She reports a "rise in poaching and poisoning and an increase in requests from farmers for depredation permits of native wildlife, which is not justified."

Jill Wilson, environmental scientist, California Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, added, "The removal of habitat that protects water quality is counter to state regulations for irrigated agricultural lands."



**BARE IS BAD:** This lone tree stands as a reminder that removal of habitat protecting water quality is counter to state regulations for irrigated agricultural lands.



**TREES REMOVED:** Tree lines that served as windbreaks and habitat for beneficial insects and rodent-eating raptors in the past are rapidly being removed because of the fear that native birds are significant vectors of *E. coli* O157.

## We're your Tree Source for

### Super-High Density

# Olive Orchards



### Offering Excellent SHD Olive Oil Varietals

- Arbequina Nurstech Selection\*
- Arbosana Clone i-43\*
- Arbequina Clone i-18\*
- Koroneiki Clone i-38\*

These premiere olive tree varietals have a compact growth habit for super-density growing and the quality that makes them an excellent extra-virgin olive oil.




For the Best Selection & Delivery  
contact Sierra Gold Nurseries—

www.sierragoldtrees.com • 1-800-243-4653