

GAP Metrics a work in progress

By LEN RICHARDSON

CONFUSION still clouds strategies for dealing with food safety despite development of the Good Agricultural Practices Metrics following the 2006 *E. coli* outbreak. That issue was front and center at the recent Asilomar EcoFarm Conference.

Several speakers noted that the focus on removing vegetation around leafy green fields and fencing animals out of fields has cost farmers thousands of dollars, and ironically might increase the risk of future contamination.

"New evidence discounts the feral-pig hypothesis — the most commonly encountered explanation of how the bacteria got onto the outbreak spinach field," said Charles Benbrook, chief scientist at The Organic Center and a conference speaker. He and other presenters said based on the location of the Paicines Ranch field and the surrounding topography, runoff from cattle pastures could not have reached the field.

"Given that the irrigation water and production inputs

Key Points

- Dust, not wild animals, likely caused 2006 *E. coli* outbreak.
- Reducing "best used by" date might check contagion.
- Testing should be for pathogenic, not generic, *E. coli*.

were tested and no *E. coli* O157 was found, how did the *E. coli* get onto the field and proliferate to high enough levels to survive the triple-wash process?" Benbrook asked.

Contamination culprit

The Organic Center issued a free report, Unfinished Business: Preventing *E. coli* O157 Outbreaks in Leafy Greens, in June. It explains why dust blowing from the cattle pasture just north of the spinach field was the likely contamination source.

"Ironically, the GAP Metrics bare-earth policies to discourage animals from venturing into leafy green fields might actually increase the risk of future outbreaks because bare ground around fields will increase dust," Benbrook said.

He and other speakers ques-

tioned the GAP Metrics, which call for only a 50-foot buffer between a cattle pasture and leafy green field. In the Organic Center report, a buffer of one-half mile is called for, unless the grower and processor implement a "test and hold" comparable to the program now in place at Earthbound Farms.

Packaging changes

Several speakers called for more attention to the packaging of leafy greens for long-distance shipment. Benbrook pointed out that a majority of the illnesses were triggered by spinach consumed on days 15, 16, and 17 after the product was shipped from Salinas. The product had a 16-day "best used by" date.

He suggested adopting a maximum 12-day date in the GAP Metrics for next season. Most illnesses occur during late summer, when trucking fresh-cut, packaged leafy greens across the country requires preserving the cold chain.

"Reducing the 'best used by' date by just four days during the hottest two summer months might have prevented this outbreak," Benbrook said.

Discussion also hit on the lack of science behind the GAP Metrics water testing, which focuses on generic *E. coli*, not the pathogenic strains. Testing conducted by farms and processors during 2007 shows a low rate of *E. coli* O157 in irrigation water, and a poor correlation between the presence of generic and pathogenic *E. coli*.



SAFE GREENS: EcoFarm Conference speakers say GAP Metrics need to be revised.

Money won't fix food safety

LEAFLY green produce safety is still in the spotlight. The White House budget requests a \$130 million increase in FDA's budget, much of it for food safety. The USDA budget requests a record \$1.1 billion for the Food Safety and Inspection Service.

But throwing money at the problem may not make it go away because of overlap in both responsibilities and expenditures. A recent Government Accountability Office report notes the Food and Drug Administration is one of 15 federal agencies that administers at least 30 laws related to food safety.

"Four agencies — USDA, FDA, EPA and National Marine Fisheries Service — spent a total of \$1.7 billion on food safety in fiscal year 2003," explains GAO's Lisa Shanes. Accredited USDA and FDA for nearly 90% of those expenditures — the majority for USDA though it is responsible for only about 20% of the food supply. In contrast, FDA accounted for 24% of expenses but is responsible for 80% of the food supply.

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