

Highlights and Recommendations from 11/20 "Food Safety War on Wildlife Teach-In

MEDIA ADVISORY

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Food Safety Practices for Leafy Greens Increase Risk of Pathogens by Destroying Vegetation and Wildlife Habitat

Watsonville, CA – November 24, 2008 – Held last Thursday November 20, at 1 Fort Mason, San Francisco, the day-long conference "Food Safety Gone Astray: The Misguided War on Wildlife" uncovered for an audience of over one hundred the little known history of how we have come to the untenable position of removing wildlife habitat that in scientific and actual fact, protects food safety.

The war on wildlife intensified after the FDA's overblown recall of all bagged and bunched spinach following the 2006 California spinach contamination, causing a backlash in the leafy greens industry. Marketing strategies based on the misconstrued perception that sterile farming situations protect the consumer forced farmers to put up fences, poison, trap and otherwise eliminate wildlife, and to take out habitat. Alternatives to these destructive practices were identified during "Food Safety Gone Astray: The Misguided War on Wildlife," presented by the Wild Farm Alliance. (www.wildfarmalliance.org)

Fifteen experts from a diverse group of non-governmental and governmental organizations, as well as a produce shipper and a rancher, presented compelling evidence of why fresh cut, bagged leafy greens are a risky product in terms of contamination; how unsafe practices in livestock management threaten the safety of leafy greens; how the FDA's lax laws allow for the overuse of antibiotics in livestock, which poses risks to human health; and how natural systems like wetlands must be retained and restored to protect public health.

Bagged leafy greens - a mixed bag of convenience and risk

"Bagged, fresh-cut leafy greens are a mixed bag," says **Jo Ann Baumgartner, director, Wild Farm Alliance (WFA)**. "On one hand is convenience, and on the other are impacts to wildlife. Before the 2006 spinach *E. coli* contamination, processors were mainly concerned with the public relations problem of wildlife parts in bags of leafy greens that are industrially shaved from within inches of the ground," she says. Since "native wildlife pose little risk of food borne illnesses," as **UC Santa Cruz Doctoral Candidate Diana Stuart** points out, they were considered a food quality issue, not a food safety issue. At that time, farmers were already required to put up plastic lined fences to reduce wildlife intrusion.

"Once the spinach crisis occurred and the industry lost millions of dollars," Baumgartner says, "the scrutiny of wildlife was amped up in an effort to take the focus off a risky product. The fact is, the bag itself is a micro-incubator. Many cut leaf surfaces increase areas of infection, and washing of thousands of pounds of greens at a time can spread pathogens to scores of consumers." **Dave Runsten, director, Community Alliance with Family Farmers**, confirmed this with a new chart showing 17 out of 26 outbreaks known to the FDA and Center for Disease Control between 1993 and 2008 were traced to the fresh cut leafy green (bagged) industry.

Marketing food safety

In an effort to gain sales back, the LGMA or Leafy Green Marketing Agreement was born to market safe greens. The LGMA is run by members of large corporations and sanctioned by California Department of Food and Agriculture. According to Baumgartner "At first their farm requirements for food safety were cobbled together and problematic, but have improved over time. There are still issues with it – a) vague areas where food safety auditors can still require habitat removal, b) it is too over-reaching in its inclusion of bunched greens and lettuce heads instead of just those bagged, and c) it still lists deer or animals of significant risk – with not enough data to back that up." While the LGMA has these problems, it is considered by most to be far better than other food safety requirements because it is transparent and has shown it will make changes.

Supermetrics, or the new name WFA gives them – Superficial metrics – “go beyond the LGMA metrics, and are causing most of the problems. The Supermetrics are based on the perception that sterile farming situations protect the consumer, and so require sterile ground buffers of up to 450’ between crops and habitat,” says Baumgartner. The Supermetrics have little regard for laws and regulations protecting habitat, endangered species, water quality, and in the case of the federal organic rule, requiring farmers maintain or improve the natural resources, including water, wetlands, woodlands and wildlife. Stuart worked on a survey documenting how a large percentage of Monterey Bay region farmers that manage 140,000 acres were being forced by their buyers to put up fences, poison, trap and otherwise eliminate wildlife, and to take out habitat.

Cattle are common carriers of pathogenic *E. coli*, and to a lesser degree, feral pigs

Adding to the confusion, cattle were ignored, when according to Stuart, “they are the top known reservoir. From two to 50% of herds studied carry *E. coli* O157:H7.” The diet of cattle may influence the presence of this pathogen, but it is still debated whether grain or grass is a factor. She points out though that “unlike native wildlife, feral pigs are a problem and should be hunted and trapped. Since they have not evolved here, they do not have natural predators and so don’t use habitat as cover – they are driven by the need for food and water.”

Vegetation and wetlands filter pathogens, promote healthy ecosystems

If the consequences weren’t so serious, and the science wasn’t so compelling, resource conservationists like **Danny Marquis, resource conservationist, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service** wouldn’t be so adamant. He says “Studies demonstrate that relatively 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.” Marquis is part of a team that is working to educate food safety auditors about the risks of not having these systems. Stuart adds that “other natural processes also take place such as those in soils with diverse microorganisms which can suppress pathogenic *E. coli*.”

Terry Palmisano, wildlife biologist, California Department of Fish and Game says her agency “is concerned about the habitat destruction and the loss of wildlife due to food safety requirements of the Supermetrics.” She reported a “rise in poaching and poisoning and an increase in requests from farmers for deprecation 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. We encourage farmers to talk to their food safety inspectors to separate the foreign objects from microbial issues, and to share with them that vegetation helps to reduce pathogens.” The Board would also like to see deer off LGMA’s list of animals of significant risk.

According to **Bill Stevens, natural resource management specialist, National Marine Fisheries Service** (NMFS), “While both environmental and anthropogenic factors affect the South-Central California Coast Steelhead present in the Salinas River, the two food safety activities that concern NMFS are vegetation removal and fencing.” He reported “the last count in the river averaged 50 adults in 2001, down from 500 in 1983, and 3,600 in 1946. Vegetation provides water filtration and absorption, and reduces the deposition of sediment and pollutants into waterways. If the water is too turbid, steelhead may not be able to migrate or their gills can be damaged. Riparian vegetation provides cover and shade, and is important for maintaining low stream temperature, stabilizing banks, and providing food sources for migrating steelhead. Fencing along the Salinas River will put additional pressure on steelhead and their habitat due to the likelihood of maintenance activities, such as clearing vegetation to install and maintain the fence. When fencing gets displaced during a flood or high flows, it could potentially impede steelhead migration.”

FDA contributes to practices that pose threats to wildlife and human health

It might be simple if the story stopped here. Instead it is linked to livestock and the schizophrenic actions of FDA under-regulations and overreactions. The FDA’s lax rules allow the practice of giving antibiotics as feed to livestock. According to **Dr. Robert Lawrence, director, Center for a Livable Future and professor, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health**, “Over 16 anti-microbials are used in poultry as growth promoters, 9 of which are important in human medicine. Antibiotics used for various livestock in North Carolina alone equal total use by humans in the US. Antibiotic resistance develops when widespread, prolonged, and sub-lethal doses of antibiotics are given to livestock, especially when crowding and sub-optimal hygiene occurs in single species monocultures. The antibiotic-resistant bacteria then can be spread to humans through the air, surface and ground water drunk or used for irrigation of crops, and through the consumption of meat products.” He added, “The public health sector is just beginning to analyze the food system now that it has become more industrialized. We are seeing significant costs come with industrialization, many of which are not captured in the cost of food.” External costs include depletion and pollution of resources, loss of biodiversity, economic, social, and health costs.

The FDA at other times has overreacted when the same antibiotic-resistant bacteria shows up in America’s food supply without first ground-truthing its information. **Kirk Schmidt, a farmer and the director of the Central**

Coast Water Quality Preservation, Inc. concluded from the audience that “The FDA is ultimately responsible and needs to be brought into the discussion. Just as the FDA hurt the tomato industry with its recall when it was really hot peppers to blame, by unilaterally recalling all bunched and bagged spinach across the US instead of those bags from Dole’s California plant, it took unjustified actions that hurt spinach processors, shippers and farmers.” Backed into a corner, the leafy greens industry lashed back and initiated the misdirected war on wildlife.

Recommendations for food safety policy and practices

Dave Runsten calls for “focusing on problem areas, such as the processed leafy green product and its handling in transport and retail—rather than imposing blanket and unscientific rules on farmers. Food safety rules need to preserve organic and traditional farming. Small farms are hurt the most by one-size-fits-all regulations.” He suggests that “the industry consider reducing shelf life of bags, and that more food safety research is needed especially non-proprietary research on processing.” **Bu Nygrens, co-owner, Veritable Vegetable (VV)** says her company has not bought into the voluntary LGMA regulations, much less the Supermetrics. “As a long-time distributor of organic produce that values sustainability and a systems approach, VV supports the development of science-based protocols that address the diversity of farm scales, and takes into account diverse farming situations and sustainable practices. VV takes a holistic approach toward food safety that does not put the burden on farmers alone.”

Jovita Pajarillo, associate director of water division, EPA brought up the irony that “some of the same companies with the worst food safety metrics disregarding water quality and the benefits of habitat have double standards because of their publicly touted sustainability policies.” She would like to see buyers “do their part in solving this conflict.” Baumgartner called for “the Super-ficial metrics to be more transparent and conforming to environmental regulations, that food quality issues be separated from food safety issues, that leafy green salad mix harvester design and scouting procedures be improved, and that all food safety inspectors be required to be tested and certified.” Ground beef and leafy greens are not two separate issues, but are joined at the hip. Lawrence put forth a set of recommendations he helped create from the Pew Commission’s *Putting Meat on the Table* report, including the restriction of the use of anti-microbials in food animals; the improvement of monitoring and reporting of anti-microbial use and anti-microbial resistance; the increase in veterinary oversight of all anti-microbials used in food animals, and the forging of interagency cooperation.

“As goes California, so goes the rest of the nation. This war on wildlife is misguided,” says Dan Imhoff, director, Watershed Media. Rancher Becky Weed would like to see the issue be reformulated as a joint problem to be solved by the buyers and the leafy greens and cattle industries. She also called for “the need to play by the earth’s rules, not just Wall Street’s rules.” Andy Kimbrell, director, Center for Food Safety, reiterated “As we create the future of food, we have to change our economy and production to fit the laws of nature.”

CONTACTS / LINKS TO PRESENTATIONS

Name, Title, Organization, Phone, Email, Link to Presentation in pdf Format

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