

Press Coverage and releases

From: Paul Simonds
Sent: Monday, June 08, 2009 11:07 AM
To: Paul Simonds
Subject: FRESH PRODUCE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS PETITION USDA FOR A NATIONAL LEAFY GREENS MARKETING AGREEMENT

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Flagged

Date: June 8, 2009

Contact: Wendy Fink-Weber
Director of Communications, Western Growers
(949) 885-2256 or wfweber@wga.com

FRESH PRODUCE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS PETITION USDA FOR A NATIONAL LEAFY GREENS MARKETING AGREEMENT

Today a proponent group of agricultural associations representing the leafy greens industry across the U.S. sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) formally requesting the agency begin the process necessary to establish a national marketing agreement for leafy greens (NLGMA). A NLGMA would implement best practices and a corresponding verification program that could reduce the potential for microbial contamination in these crops.

"This marketing agreement is an excellent example of our fresh produce associations working together for the good of the industry," said Charles Hall, executive director of the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association. "The 'proposed agreement' guarantees all parties - growers, packers, handlers, manufacturers and end-users - are at the table as we move forward to ensure the food safety of leafy greens for the consumer."

The proponent group; comprised of the United Fresh Produce Association, Produce Marketing Association, Georgia Fresh Vegetable Association, Georgia Farm Bureau, Texas Vegetable Association, Arizona Farm Bureau, Leafy Greens Council, California Farm Bureau, California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, Grower-Shipper Association of Central California and Western Growers; has been in discussions with leafy greens growers, handlers, other trade associations and stakeholders throughout the country developing a draft leafy greens marketing agreement. The purpose of the NLGMA is to improve consumer confidence in leafy greens; enhance the quality of fresh leafy green vegetable products through the application of good agricultural practices; implement a uniform, auditable, science-based food quality enhancement program; provide for USDA validation and verification of program compliance and foster greater collaboration with local, state and federal regulators.

"A national marketing agreement would bring some much needed clarity and consistency to the myriad, often conflicting and occasionally confounding food safety requirements now being imposed on leafy greens producers," said Robert J. Whitaker, Ph.D., Chief Science

Officer, Produce Marketing Association. "As a former producer myself, I know how much this focus would be appreciated by the producer community."

The leafy greens industry took immediate action following the E. coli outbreak associated with spinach in 2006 developing and implementing the California Leafy Greens Producers Marketing Agreement within six months of the outbreak. Ninety-nine percent of all handlers participate in the program. They are assessed a per carton fee which is paid to the state department of agriculture which employs USDA-certified inspectors/auditors. The program is administered by a nonprofit organization under state government oversight. A similar program is also now in place in Arizona. The two agreements account for about 90 percent of the nation's leafy greens production.

"We are pleased this process is now at a stage that allows stakeholders from across the country to provide comments and recommendations on how best to develop a national leafy greens marketing agreement that can provide a strong science based framework to improve the quality of U.S. and imported leafy green products," said Robert Guenther, Senior V.P. of Public Policy for United Fresh Produce.

The USDA will review the request and publish a Notice of Hearing in the Federal Register announcing the request, solicit input from stakeholders and schedule public hearing dates.

"This is really the first step in the process for USDA to commence the formal development of a national leafy greens marketing agreement that will enhance the preventative steps on the farm aimed at increasing the safety of leafy green vegetables," said Western Growers Vice President of Strategic Planning, Science and Technology Hank Giclas. "A national leafy greens marketing agreement marries the talent and expertise of industry, academic and regulatory stakeholders in a union committed to the common goal of high quality safe leafy greens for the consumer."

A draft agreement is ready for comment and review from all stakeholders at www.nlgma.org. This web site will provide additional information to all interested parties including the proponent letter to the USDA.

For more information, you may contact the Western Growers' Director of Communications Wendy Fink-Weber (949) 885-2256 (wfweber@wga.com); United Fresh Produce Vice President of Communications Ray Gilmer (202) 303-3425 (RGilmer@unitedfresh.org); or Produce Marketing Association's Public Relations Director Julia Stewart (703) 727-8808 (JStewart@pma.com).

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NLGMA hearings seek public input

Sep 14, 2009 9:32 AM. By Cary Blake, Farm Press Editorial Staff

The main goal of the NLGMA is to utilize scientific-based best-management practices in the production and handling of leafy greens to help ensure safe food products for consumers.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will conduct seven listening sessions over the next several weeks to garner public input on the agency's proposed National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement (NLGMA).

The main goal of the NLGMA is to utilize scientific-based best-management practices in the production and handling of leafy greens to help ensure safe food products for consumers.

The NLGMA is endorsed by a plethora of proponent agricultural groups including the United Fresh Produce Association, Produce Marketing Association, Western Growers, the California and Arizona Farm Bureaus, California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, and the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California.

The proposed program would cover leafy greens grown in the U.S. and greens imported into the U.S.

The first NLGMA hearing will be held Sept. 22-24, in Monterey, Calif., at the Hyatt Regency Monterey located at 1 Old Golf Course Rd. A second hearing in the West is scheduled for Oct. 14-15, in Yuma, Ariz., at the Yuma Convention Center, 1440 Desert Hills Dr.

Other hearings include: Sept. 30 - Oct. 1, Jacksonville, Fla.; Oct. 6, Columbus, Ohio; Oct. 8, Denver, Colo.; Oct. 20, Syracuse, N.Y.; and Oct. 22, Charlotte, N. C.

A national program could closely mirror the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement developed in 2006 by growers and their associations following an E. coli outbreak traced back to California-grown spinach. The outbreak severely damaged consumer confidence in leafy green safety.

The California agreement governs the production of arugula, butter lettuce, chard, escarole, iceberg lettuce, red leaf lettuce, spinach, baby leaf lettuce, cabbage, endive, green leaf lettuce, kale, romaine lettuce, and spring mix.

An almost identical agreement was launched in Arizona in 2007.

The NLGMA would provide a framework for signatory handlers to voluntarily enroll in the program. Once a member, handlers would be required to buy leafy greens only grown and handled according to accepted best management guidelines.

This is the same framework laid out in the California and Arizona agreements.

The NLGMA would likely include specific guidelines (metrics) based on specific growing areas in the nation.

According to USDA, the NLGMA would be financed by assessments on first handlers of leafy green vegetables for the fresh market. The program would be administered by a 23-member committee. Most members would be growers and handlers nominated by industry and appointed by USDA.

email: cblake@farmpress.com

Find this article at:

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Economy

Lawmakers scrutinize food safety regulations

BY COURTENAY EDELHART, Californian staff writer

cedelhart@bakersfield.com | Friday, Aug 28 2009 05:21 PM

Last Updated Friday, Aug 28 2009 05:23 PM

Food safety proposals that would give the U.S. Food and Drug Administration far broader authority to regulate how food is grown and processed have divided farmers.

Some would like to see voluntary industry safety precautions made standard and mandatory nationwide to win back the confidence of frightened consumers. Others say additional bureaucracy would cost too much time and money even as many growers and ranchers are struggling to keep from going under.

In July, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill that would be the most significant overhaul of food safety laws since the 1930s.

The Senate is expected to take up a similar bill after returning from its August recess. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., is the sponsor.

Both measures would step up inspections and make sweeping changes to every phase of food production, from the farm to the consumer's tabletop. At each stop along that journey, producers, processors and manufacturers would be required to identify risks of food-borne illness and create a plan to address those risks.

The focus on food safety follows a spate of recent outbreaks that have sickened thousands of Americans who ate products as varied as cookie dough, peanuts, peppers, pistachios and spinach.

An estimated 76 million cases of foodborne disease occur each year in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some 5,000 of those cases are fatal.

"We need comprehensive food safety reform as soon as possible," said Ami Gadhia, policy counsel for Consumers Union, one of several consumer groups pushing for closer scrutiny of the nation's food supply. "The system has been in pretty bad shape for a long time, and it needs to be updated."

The California Farm Bureau Federation says it strongly supports initiatives to make food safer, but has reservations about the proposals currently under consideration.

There aren't provisions to compensate growers who suffer losses related to a quarantine or recall, for one thing.

The bureau's director of public policy, Jack King, pointed to last spring's warning to avoid tomatoes before further investigation found that, in fact, it was peppers that had sickened more than 1,400 people.

The false alarm cost the U.S. tomato industry an estimated \$100 million in sales.

Some also are worried about the quarantine threshold being too low because it kicks in upon reasonable suspicion of contamination rather than when a problem is confirmed.

King added he'd prefer a voluntary system of certification to one managed by the government.

"We like the ability to do adaptive management where you can make changes as needed," he said. "We worry a little about one-size-fits all regulations."

Trade groups note the success of the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement, an industry safety program initiated after a deadly 2006 E. coli outbreak in spinach.

The program has become a model for other states, and some foreign buyers won't purchase California spinach from anyone who doesn't participate.

Gadhia at Consumers Union readily concedes that "the majority of growers and food processors are doing the right thing most of the time, but there are people who don't.

"Food needs to be safe no matter who you buy it from and whether or not you're rich or poor."

Western Growers, a trade group of more than 3,000 farmers in California and Arizona, says it's OK with expanding the scope of safety precautions and giving them the force of law.

"We have an awful lot invested in the food safety issue," said Western Growers President Tom Nassif. "We know how important the trust of the consumer is, because once you lose it, it's hard to get it back."

The other advantage to adopting a law nationwide is it helps California farmers compete with growers in states and foreign countries that have lower safety standards.

"This evens the playing field, because right now some of our California growers are at a disadvantage," said Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, who helped work on the bill that passed in the House.

It's not clear yet exactly when the Senate version will come up for a vote, with debate still underway on such high-profile issues as health care reform and climate change.

But local growers such as Pete Belluomini of Lehr Brothers will watch closely.

"Nobody likes more regulation," he said. "But in a changing time and a changing world, some of it, to a degree, may be necessary."

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Crops & Markets

Seminar answers questions about leafy greens agreement

Published on 08/20/2009 09:25am By Tom Karst

Questions about how a National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement would deal with issues like exemptions for small growers, super metrics, audits and treatment of imports were topics of a Web Seminar.

After education presentations about the agreement for about 30 minutes — mostly drawing on facts available from a pro-agreement Web site, www.lgma.com — participants asked questions about the plan.

Charles Hall, executive director of the La Grange-based Georgia Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association, moderated the session. United Fresh Produce Association senior vice president of public policy Robert Guenther and Hank Giclas, vice president of science, technology and strategic planning for Western Growers were panelists.

In addition, U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service senior marketing specialist Melissa Schmaedick provided the agency's perspective on the progress of the industry's proposal. She said it may take up to two years to complete the process.

The agency hasn't set dates yet for public meetings on a national program and said USDA stresses the agency is not a "proponent" of the agreement at this point in the process.

Later, responding to a question, she said the USDA would be prepared to handle the audit requirements of a national leafy greens marketing agreement.

One participant asked if "super metrics" — food safety specifications from buyers beyond what the agreement might set — could be avoided.

"The intent of the proponent group is to establish a set of baseline standards, communicate effectively and thus reduce the need for some of these super metrics," Giclas said.

He said national agreement supporters are discussing the agreement with buyers in the hopes of reducing the need for additional specifications.

"Collectively I think we will see a reduction in the pressure (for super metrics)," he said.

California and Arizona metrics will be the backdrop for moving forward with details of a national agreement, but they will be adjusted based on region-specific issues, he said.

Giclas said passage of a national agreement would supersede the need for state agreements in California and Arizona, though he said the national agreement could use them as cooperators or resources for the national agreement

"Ultimately we want a single program that works for everybody," he said

Schmaedick said the national leafy greens agreement is considered a domestic program, but participants who

import would be limited to products grown under a good agricultural practices-audited environment. Domestic handlers would ask USDA to audit their foreign producers they are doing business with, she said.

Guenther said it was still unclear whether organic of small growers would be exempt.

Giclas said that there are no exemptions in the California and Arizona agreements, but like the national agreement's proposal, it's a voluntary program.

"The hope is that we would minimize the need for exemptions, but if necessary the committee has the ability to craft those if they deemed that necessary," Giclas said.

Guenther also said the Produce Traceability Initiative should be complementary to possible national leafy greens agreement guidelines.

Giclas said a draft of the agreement suggests audits of growing regions at least once a year.

One participant asked whether buyers would be compelled to purchase only from participants in the agreement, and Hall said buyers would have to make that decision.

Supporters of the national agreement include the United Fresh Produce Association, the Produce Marketing Association, the Georgia Fresh Vegetable Association, Georgia Farm Bureau, Texas Vegetable Association, Arizona Farm Bureau, Leafy Greens Council, California Farm Bureau, California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, Grower-Shipper Association of Central California and Western Growers.

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Top Stories

Leafy greens industry to sponsor Web seminar

Published on 08/12/2009 09:42am By Doug Ohlemeier

Average rating: (7)

With a National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement on the horizon, grower-shippers are invited to attend a Web seminar to prepare for possible changes.



The one-hour Aug. 19 seminar, scheduled for 1 p.m. PST, is free and open to anyone interested in the issue, said Wendy Fink-Weber, director of communications for Western Growers, Irvine, Calif. Western Growers is one of a group of marketing agreement supporters sponsoring the seminar.

By late August, the leafy greens industry expects the U.S. Department of Agriculture to publish a notice in the Federal Register on the National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement — modeled on the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement — and solicit written comments and hold public hearings.

"This seminar is to provide information and also be an opportunity for people interested to ask questions and get answers," she said. "This has been a productive and collegial effort on behalf of the specialty crop associations."

Charles Hall, executive director of the Georgia Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association, LaGrange, is scheduled to be the main presenter, along with Melissa Schmaedick, senior marketing specialist with the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service's Fruit and Vegetable Program, Robert Guenther, vice president of public policy for the United Fresh Produce Association, Washington, D.C., and Hank Giclas, vice president of strategic planning, science and technology for Western Growers.

Other industry people are also scheduled to participate in the conference call, including Scott Horsfall, chief executive officer of the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, Sacramento.

Others in the National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement Proponent Group are the Farm Bureaus of Arizona, California and Georgia; the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California, Salinas, Calif.; the Leafy Greens Council, St. Paul, Minn.; the Produce Marketing Association, Newark, Del.; and the Texas Vegetable Association, Mission.

Find more information at nlgma.org/.

Tags: [food safety](#), [greens](#), [lettuce](#), [spinach](#)

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Latest Slide Show
California growers in late June started harvesting crops of green leaf, iceberg and romaine lettuce and spinach. Check out more coverage in **The Packer's** special section, publishing July 27.



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Top Stories

FDA works on enforceable standards for produce

Published on 07/30/2009 11:58am By Tom Karst

The Food and Drug Administration is working to establish enforceable standards for produce safety even before food safety reform legislation passes Congress.

Michael Taylor, senior advisor to the commissioner of the FDA, told lawmakers of the Domestic Policy subcommittee of the Government Reform Committee on July 29 that FDA's approach in the short term will be to issue commodity specific guidance.



Taylor, who spoke during a House hearing on the effectiveness of the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, said the agency plans to work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service to include those standards in marketing orders when appropriate.

Over the long term, he said the FDA plans to set enforceable produce standards through a regulation that he said will be based on "prevention oriented public health principles."

"The regulation also will utilize the progress industry has made in establishing quantitative metrics for the control of some of the factors affecting produce safety by incorporating appropriate measures of success," he said.

The produce safety regulation will be enforced with the help of federal and state partners, he said to "implement and plan an inspection and enforcement program to ensure high rates of compliance."

Taylor said the regulations would include clear standards for modern preventive controls by all participants from farm to market, product specific guidance for high-risk commodities, measures on the effectiveness of control systems and microbial testing protocols to verify the effectiveness of preventive controls.

The primary focus of the hearing was the California Leafy Green Marketing Agreement and its possible expansion to a national leafy greens agreement under the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In his opening statement, subcommittee chairman Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, said the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement illustrated the work of private industry to safeguard America's food supply. However, he said there were "blind spots" to the agreement.

"(The agreement) condones a processing activity, favored by the ready-to-eat processing industry, known as 'coring' lettuce in the field, and only suggests minimal guidelines for sanitary treatment of harvest equipment used for 'coring,' in spite of recent scientific research identifying the potential for transferring pathogens deep into the cored lettuce, where the subsequent washing process would be unable to reach," he said in his statement.

In addition, he said that the agreement was silent on the use of modified atmosphere packaging of ready-to-eat produce and noted it does not require an "enforceable standard of cold chain of distribution."

One top lobbyist said the questions by Kucinich about the leafy greens marketing agreement role in regulating processors were off base.

“Currently, processing facilities are under regulatory requirements under Good Manufacturing Practices and they acted like that didn’t exist,” said Robert Guenther, senior vice president of public policy for United Fresh Produce Association, Washington, D.C. On the other hand, Good Agricultural Practices are voluntary, so those grower practices were the focus of the leafy greens agreement,” Guenther said. “We’re extremely disappointed in this hearing. The committee doesn’t understand the industry as well as they should.”

Kucinich said the agreement doesn’t have any tough standards on packagers and distributors related to “best consumed by date” on packaging of ready to eat leafy greens. In questioning of panelists, Kucinich asked if the best consumed date is now 15 days to 17 days after produce is processed compared to seven years ago when the best consumed by date was closer to 5 to 7 days.

“I would ask you Mr. Taylor to take note of that,” he said. “Isn’t a shorter best consumed by period in the interest of protecting the public’s health?”

Kucinich asked the FDA to provide the committee a spreadsheet that correlates recent foodborne illness with best used by date.

“It seems the farmers have taken the brunt of the burden of minimizing contamination, when it may make more scientific sense to focus attention on the processing, packaging and distribution of ready to eat produce,” Kucinich said.

The committee’s focus on the activities of processors showed real misunderstanding of what the California Leafy Green Handlers Marketing Agreement was set up to do, said Scott Horsfall, chief executive officer of the Sacramento-based group.

Horsfall said processors are a segment of the industry already highly regulated by the FDA.

“The marketing agreement was set up to address an area where there wasn’t a mandatory verification program and that’s the farm,” he said in an interview after the hearing.

Horsfall said another misconception by some lawmakers is that the national leafy greens marketing agreement now under discussion would be a “nationalization” of California’s program.

“It would be a new organization – we hope that we have done can serve a model– but it will have its own rules, its own requirements, its own regulation and its own decision about what metrics will be and how they will operate,” he said. “That’s important to make clear.”

In his questioning of Taylor, Kucinich asked if the leafy greens marketing agreement has made the produce safer.

“The on-farm practices make a contribution,” Taylor responded.

Kucinich then asked Taylor if it was true that every case of foodborne illness linked to leafy greens since 1999 has been linked to packaged leafy greens and Taylor said he thought that was the case.

Kucinich asked Taylor the leafy greens marketing agreement was too focused on farmers and Taylor responded that the FDA was committed to preventive control through the supply chain.

Rayne Pegg, administrator of the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, said in her testimony that USDA has not taken a position yet on national leafy greens marketing agreement.

“At the end of the day, the agreement has to work for small producers and regional producers,” she said during a question-and-answer period.

Top Stories Horsfall to speak during House hearing on leafy greens agreement

Published on 07/27/2009 05:03pm By Tom Karst
The Packer



subcommittee news release.

In addition, the hearing will focus on the bagged or value-added leafy greens sold as “ready to eat,” the release said. Lawmakers will hear testimony about the role of industry and government in overseeing leafy greens safety.

The news release said that the safety of value-added leafy greens has come under closer examination after the 2006 E. coli-linked foodborne illness outbreak.

Others scheduled to speak before the subcommittee include:

- Rayne Pegg, administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Marketing Service;
- Jeffrey Shuren, associate commissioner for policy planning for the Food and Drug Administration;
- Caroline Smith-DeWaal, director of food science for the Center for Science in the Public Interest;
- Dale Coke, grower and member of Community Alliance with Family Farmers; and
- Kelly Cobb, survivor of E. coli poisoning.

The California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement and its possible expansion is the focus of a House of Representatives hearing this week.

The House Domestic Policy Subcommittee of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform has scheduled the hearing at 2 p.m. July 29. Nathan White, spokesman for subcommittee chairman Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, said the hearing will be available on the Web at <http://domesticpolicy.oversight.house.gov/>.

The hearing will look at the track record of the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement and the proposal to expand it nationally, according to a

The Packer

Crops & Markets USDA seeks input on national leafy greens plan

Published on 07/22/2009 02:27pm By Tom Karst



WASHINGTON, D.C. — The U.S. Department of Agriculture is scheduling five public hearings on a possible national marketing agreement for leafy greens.

“We expect the hearings will take place in late September and October,” said Charles Parrot, associate deputy administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service Fruit & Vegetable Programs, on July 22.

The meetings will be in different locations, he said, with the first meeting anticipated in California. Parrot said the USDA plans to announce locations and dates for the hearings at least 30 days in advance.

He said the USDA expects to videotape the first meeting and post it on the agency’s Web site.

After the hearings, Parrot said it will take several months for USDA to analyze the comments and make recommendations.

“Based on the record, if there are things that would appear to be problematic from what was submitted from the proposal group

that we initially got, we could change those,” Parrot said.

Parrot said environmental groups and other stakeholders might be interested in giving testimony at the hearings. The proposed agreement was submitted in June by eleven national and state produce associations, including the Washington, D.C.-based United Fresh Produce Association, Irvine, Calif.-based Western Growers and the Newark, Del.-based Produce Marketing Association.

Those groups said in a letter to USDA that the proposed voluntary national leafy green marketing agreement program is designed for handlers to improve the quality of U.S. and imported leafy green products.

“Coupled with a corresponding audit-based verification program, these best practices would minimize microbial contamination of fresh leafy green vegetables in the growing and handling processes, enhance the overall quality of fresh product in the marketplace, and boost public confidence in these commodities,” the group said its letter.

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LGMA looks to increase profile with produce-buying trade

06/15/2009

As the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement begins its third year of operation, it is making a major push to help the produce-buying trade better understand its programs.

More important, the agreement is working to demonstrate that mandatory government inspections required by all members are the only truly independent farm audit a produce buyer needs.

The agreement is a mechanism for verifying that farmers follow established food-safety practices through regular audits conducted by U.S. Department of Agriculture-trained inspectors. Its members handle approximately 99 percent of the volume of leafy green products grown in California.

"The LGMA has been in existence since 2007, and most people in the produce industry are aware of it. However, there is still some misinformation about the specifics of our program," Scott Horsfall, chief executive officer of the agreement, said in a press release. "This year, we are taking some very direct actions to make sure produce buyers fully understand the value of LGMA."

The first step in this process has been to hire a technical expert who will be calling on retail and foodservice companies to personally deliver information about the agreement.

"The LGMA is pleased to report we have contracted with produce industry veteran Dennis Kihlstadius to serve as our representative in educating the trade about LGMA programs and inspection activities," Mr. Horsfall added in the press release, explaining that Mr. Kihlstadius is currently conducting a series of one-on-one meetings throughout the country with produce-buying companies. "The meetings are designed not just to educate buyers about LGMA but to establish an open dialogue to ensure the California leafy greens industry is adequately addressing food-safety requirements for buyers."

Mr. Kihlstadius, who has represented numerous commodity groups over the years, has owned Produce Technical Service since 1988. His specialty is in providing post-harvest handling consultation and he has worked with retailers, wholesalers and foodservice operations throughout the world. He has introduced and implemented ripening programs for avocados, tomatoes and pears, and he often lectures on this topic for the University of California-Davis and the Produce Marketing Association's Produce Academy.

"Dennis has a tremendous amount of experience in communicating complicated, technical aspects of produce industry operations," Mr. Horsfall added in the press release. "We believe this expertise will be useful in communicating with the produce-buying community about the LGMA metrics, how they are implemented and verified, and how they can become a crucial element in a food-safety program."

Mr. Horsfall noted that the agreement has produced a series of informational materials, including a technical binder, which contains details on the LGMA metrics and audit program. Mr. Kihlstadius will be delivering this information during meetings with retail and foodservice businesses.

Along with the addition of Mr. Kihlstadius, the organization recently held a seminar to arm the leafy greens industry's sales and marketing personnel with information on how to better communicate information about the agreement to their own customers. The event, attended by over 60 individuals from 25 companies, was held in April in Monterey, CA, and was titled, Tools for Talking about Food Safety.

The seminar was led by Carmine Gallo, a well-known communications coach for companies such as Intel, Chase, Nokia and Home Depot. Mr. Gallo presented to the group a set of tools to help members talk about the value of the agreement's programs and why buyers should support and accept them.

Produce buyers can find information about the agreement on-line at www.caleafygreens.ca.gov, where they also can sign up for an e-mail notification system to receive information regarding membership status, decertification actions, changes to the food-safety practices and other pertinent updates.



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The Packer

Top Stories National leafy greens agreement proposed

Published on 06/08/2009 04:45pm By Dawn Withers

(UPDATED 4:45 p.m. June 8) Major produce trade groups are asking the U.S. Department of Agriculture to establish a national leafy greens marketing agreement.

In a June 8 news release from the Western Growers Association, Irvine, Calif., the groups said a national agreement is the best way to "implement best practices and a corresponding verification

program that could reduce the potential for microbial contamination in these crops."



A national agreement would "improve consumer confidence in leafy greens; enhance the quality of fresh leafy green vegetable products through the application of good agricultural practices; implement a uniform, auditable, science-based food quality enhancement program; provide for USDA validation and verification of program compliance and foster greater collaboration with local, state and federal regulators," according to the release.

Hank Giclas, vice president of strategic planning, science and technology for Western Growers, said the association, along with the other partner agencies, spent eight months meeting with other industry groups and growers on building support and the details for the proposal.

A proposed national leafy greens marketing agreement would be similar to, but not exactly alike, the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement.

"We want the leafy greens industry across the country to be engaged in this," Giclas said.

Giclas said the partnership asked USDA to conduct public hearings and approve an administrative committee, pending industry backing, to oversee the agreement by early 2010. The national agreement would be structured like one in California, with voluntary sign ups for leafy green handlers who would be bound to set a food safety rules once they are part of the program.

Two primary differences, Giclas said, are the national agreement's food safety rules would be flexible to accommodate regional differences, including length of season and risk factors, and not a copy of the California or Arizona programs. It would also cover importers of leafy greens and their foreign suppliers. Handlers who sign up would pay a carton-based assessment, Giclas said.

Backers of the national agreement include the United Fresh Produce Association, Produce Marketing Association, Georgia Fresh Vegetable Association, Texas Vegetable Association, Leafy Greens Council, California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, Grower-Shipper Association of Central California, the Western Growers Association and state Farm Bureau affiliates in Arizona, California and Georgia.

These groups had discussions with leafy greens growers, handlers, other trade associations and stakeholders throughout the country in developing a draft leafy greens marketing agreement, according to the news release.

A draft agreement is ready for comment and review from all stakeholders at www.nlhma.org.

In 2006, a California leafy greens marketing agreement was adopted by the industry following the E. coli outbreak linked to bagged spinach. A similar agreement is in place in Arizona.

The Packer

Top Stories **Leafy greens group begins awareness work with buyers**

Published on 06/04/2009 04:54pm By Dawn Withers

(UPDATED COVERAGE, JUNE 4, 4:54 P.M.) The California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement is starting a promotion for produce buyers to better understand how the agreement works.

The organization wants buyers to know that the audits conducted through its program are the only ones needed to ensure leafy greens meet the highest food safety standards, said Scott Horsfall, chief executive officer.

Horsfall said Dennis Kihlstadius was hired as a consultant in April to meet personally with major produce buyers about how audits work under the agreement and its food safety protocol. Horsfall said Kihlstadius is working on compiling contacts with buyers and will be meeting with companies this summer.

"The goal is to make sure we are doing everything we can to raise awareness of the marketing agreement," Horsfall said.

Horsfall said he does not have a large enough staff to send someone on the road regularly and Kihlstadius' relationship with the industry is a major asset. Horsfall said Kihlstadius will work with the organization for as long as it takes to meet with produce buyers.

The another goal of Kihlstadius' work is to eliminate duplicative audits buyers often require of growers in addition to audits performed under the agreement, Horsfall said.

Horsfall said the organization has an open-ended agreement with Kihlstadius and expects it to take several months to meet with all major buyers.

"What we ultimately want to achieve is building support for LGMA food safety certification among buyers," he said.

Fresh Plaza - June 4, 2009

Leafy greens safety program serves as national model

San Benito County farm manager Mark Wright said one of the benefits of the Leafy Greens Marketing agreement is enhanced trace-back procedures. Every carton coming out of the fields he manages has a coding sticker that can be used to help identify the day, the field and the crew.

On the outskirts of Hollister, farm manager Mark Wright drives past a lush spinach field, studying the still dewy leaves. Making his morning field rounds, he's deciding on the optimum time for harvest.

Rewind to September 2006 and Wright recalls that this same spinach field was being disked under because an E. coli outbreak had been traced to spinach fields in San Benito County. At the time, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration cautioned consumers to avoid all fresh spinach and the market collapsed. He plowed under as many as 4 million pounds of harvest-ready spinach.

Today, efforts to address food safety in California farm fields have been on fast-forward. The Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement—informed by rigorous science and government oversight—has near universal commitment from leafy greens growers throughout the state. And, after nearly three years of work, the agreement is seen as a successful food safety model by other commodities, other states, the nation and international importers.

Already Arizona has adopted the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement model and Florida is considering doing the same. There's a national coalition of produce marketing groups and agricultural associations forming now to extend the agreement nationwide, as well.

Both Canada and Mexico have made it clear they will only accept fresh leafy greens from California grown under the requirements of the LGMA.

At the same time there's food safety legislation pending in Congress and discussion about redefining federal oversight of the nation's food safety system. This summer, House Energy and Commerce subcommittee members will tour leafy greens fields on the Central Coast to learn more about requirements under the LGMA.

The California agreement covers the production and processing of leafy greens for about 115 volunteer members, both farmers and processors, who've agreed to use the carefully defined food safety practices and submit government audits and inspections. The participants produce more than 95 percent of all leafy greens grown and processed in California.

"In light of what happened in 2006, there was an immediate response in the fields," Wright said, donning a hair net and striding toward a harvester and field crew in a Filice Farms field of romaine lettuce. "As required by the LGMA, we have strict field sanitation procedures and we've restricted access to our fields and really enforce it.

"These days we're far more aware of who's entering and leaving our ranches," he said, checking a bucket of disinfectant hanging from the harvester's conveyors. Workers use the solution to rinse cutting knives as they slash away romaine leaves to get to the tender romaine hearts consumers prefer.

"Food safety is our highest priority," said San Benito County farmer Kay Filice. A San Benito County Farm Bureau member and former chair of the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California, she said the top goal for farmers is to prevent the risk of contamination.

For Filice Farms, she said that includes complying with the LGMA metrics. The agreement requires thorough and ongoing training for employees and supervisors, stressing field hygiene and food safety measures. Supervisors conduct risk assessments, sanitary surveys and water testing for every field prior to planting.

"In addition, there is ongoing and constant surveillance throughout the growing and harvesting period to monitor any potential environmental pressures," Filice said. "Added to that are audits by the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Trained auditors examine 184 checkpoints, request documentation of our food safety actions and order any corrective action where necessary."

Bringing fresh leafy greens from the field to the consumer—using the best food safety practices possible under the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement—requires stepped-up field hygiene and strict adherence to science-based safety procedures.

The approach is proving popular with consumers. In a 2008 research survey, 89 percent of consumers had a favorable opinion when they were told about the food safety measures and mandatory government audits. And, 70 percent of consumers said the program increased their confidence in leafy green products.

Joe Pezzini, chief operating officer of Ocean Mist Farms in Castroville, has been at the forefront of the leafy greens food safety effort. He is chairman of the LGMA and has supported expansion of the food safety system to other commodities and other states.

Evaluating the economic impact of the E. coli incident on spinach three years later is difficult, Pezzini said, given the current economy.

"A lot of the bagged leafy-green products are down generally because of the economy," he said. "But given that, spinach is about back to where it was before the outbreak. We based that on both acres planted and sales volumes. So it has taken that long for the business to come back."

The LGMA program is operated with money from grower assessments—initially 2 cents per 24-count carton. The assessment, however, was lowered this season to 1.5 cents to reflect improved program operating efficiency.

One issue that continues to add cost and complexity to growing leafy greens, Pezzini said, is the requirement by some produce buyers for more layers of food safety inspection. In some cases, he said, these additional third-party inspections go beyond the measures supported by science and appear designed to bolster marketing claims.

"What we've been trying to do with the LGMA is help buyers understand the standards and the science, the best growing and processing practices," Pezzini said. "We've had some wholesale buyers say that based on the required practices in the LGMA, they'll no longer require third-party audits."

Pezzini said there will be tours of farms on the Central Coast offered to representatives of major produce buying groups in July.

He stressed that the LGMA will continue to evolve as science advances. But, its focus will remain on a compliance and trace-back plan, water use, soil amendments, environmental conditions, worker hygiene and harvest practices.

Scott Horsfall, LGMA chief executive officer, said leafy greens growers can be proud about what's been done to ensure food safety in their fields.

"We've been asked to work with groups from around the country on a national leafy greens marketing agreement," Horsfall said. "We want to take the model that has been created here and put it in place on the national level."

Horsfall said right now a broad coalition is being formed to create a national program and that "there's a fair amount of momentum behind the concept. We hope the official process will be launched very soon."

Back in the field near Hollister, farm manager Wright walks along with harvesters as romaine is cut from the field. The farm produces 12 different crops, each following field hygiene requirements.

He said many of the field sanitation practices used for the farm's vegetable crops have been transferred to orchards, as well. He looks past the lettuce fields to the rows of cherry trees beyond a buffer strip. The bright red fruit burdening the limbs is nearly ready for harvest.

"Food safety is a major part of our program and we've incorporated safety practices into all levels of our operation," he said, kneeling to check trace-back stickers on cartons ready to be shipped to buyers. "And at the end of the day, we take some of what we harvest home to feed our own families. This is our livelihood, but it's also what we eat. It has to be safe."

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Top Stories Leafy Greens Agreement pushing buyer education initiative

Published on 05/29/2009 11:00pm By Dawn Withers

Average rating: (1)

The California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement is starting a promotion for produce buyers to better understand how the agreement works.

The organization wants buyers to know audits conducted through its program are the only ones needed to ensure leafy greens meet the highest food safety standards, according to a news release.

To help with the initiative, produce industry veteran Dennis Kihlstedius has joined the agreement as a representative and is holding individual meetings with buyers to explain the agreement's programs and inspection activities, said Scott Horsfall, chief executive officer, in a May 26 statement.

Tags: food safety, legislation, lettuce, regulation, romaine, salad mix, traceability

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Leafy Greens Get Healthy on Agreement

Distributors, processors and other "handlers" of leafy greens propose agreement to reduce the risk of food safety problems related to leafy greens.

Compiled by staff

Published: May 26, 2009

Ohio State University Extension reports that commercial growers and handlers of leafy green vegetables foresee the introduction of a proposal recommending a new national agreement for the production and handling of leafy greens. Smaller producers have concerns.

The proposal, called "Marketing Agreement Regulating Leafy Green Vegetables," is expected to be submitted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture before the end of June. It is backed by the national Leafy Greens Council and the Western Growers Association and has had input from growers as well as distributors, processors and other "handlers." The goal is to reduce the risk of food safety problems related to leafy greens, such as the E. coli outbreak that occurred in fresh spinach in 2006. A draft of the proposal is available at the Western Growers Association Web site at www.wga.com/default.php?id=858.

"We want to make sure growers in Ohio and other states are aware of what's taking place and to have a seat at the table," says Doug Doohan, fruit and vegetable specialist with Ohio State University Extension and a leader of the Ohio Roundtable on Safe Production of Fresh Produce.

"There has been some concern that any new rules would put smaller growers -- which we have in abundance in Ohio -- at a disadvantage," says Doohan. "That's not necessarily the case, but the more people know about what's being proposed, the better."

The potential proposal was discussed on May 6 at a meeting of Roundtable, which has met annually since 2007. The Roundtable is composed of Ohio produce growers and retailers as well as and Ohio State faculty and staff, and aims to foster communication between growers, researchers and Extension specialists and identify focus areas for programs involving Ohio's produce industry.

At the recent meeting, organizers invited Melissa Schmaedick, a senior marketing specialist with the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, to explain the process for marketing agreements such as the anticipated agreement for leafy greens. Schmaedick said that as a marketing agreement, the proposal must be industry-driven and, if it successfully goes through the process, will apply only to handlers who sign up to participate in the agreement and the growers who they accept produce from.

However, large retail outlets may decide that they will purchase leafy greens only from handlers who participate in the agreement. If that is case, then the agreement will, in effect, apply to all major growers and handlers, as well as to small growers who hope to someday sell product to large grocery stores and similar outlets. "That's why everyone needs to offer their input as the process unfolds," Doohan said.

Schmaedick said the agreement would not apply to growers who sell to consumers directly, such as through farmer's markets, CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) or produce stands. Also, she said the USDA is required to review potential agreements to be certain they don't put an undue burden on smaller growers.

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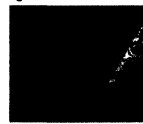
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Special sections: Salinas Valley Vegetable Leafy greens agreement on national level possible

Published on 05/21/2009 06:03pm By Dawn Withers

Average rating: (0)

Two years into the California Leafy Green Handlers Marketing Agreement, more than 99% of the state's volume is covered. With no outbreak since the agreement started, there is talk of pushing for a national model.

Scott Horsfall, chief executive officer, said during a recent presentation to the Farm Foundation Forum in Washington D.C., a national program modeled after California's emerged as a topic of discussion. Though his organization cannot lobby lawmakers on such a proposal, Horsfall said it is something the group supports.

"We want to see that happen," Horsfall said. "We don't lobby ourselves, but we are working as part of coalition to get it passed."

California's leafy greens agreement has 120 handlers representing nearly all lettuce, spinach and other leafy greens production in the state.

The agreement's 2007-08 annual report, the most recent available, said inspectors for the California Department of Food and Agriculture conducted 424 audits, finding 58% of all farms had either no citations or minor infractions that were corrected onsite while inspectors were present. Forty-two percent of farms inspected required corrective action, according to the report.

Horsfall said discussions are continuing between national industry groups and the U.S. Department of Agriculture on developing a national agreement that would require a vote by growers covered under its provisions.

"I think we've got pretty broad census among all those groups that a national marketing agreement for leafy greens makes sense and it's the right thing to do and something we should pursue," Horsfall said.

Arizona enacted an agreement similar to California's in 2007, and it could face budget cuts this year as lawmakers grapple with a deficit.

"I think it's important," said Danny Canales, vice president of sales and marketing for Misionero Vegetables, Gonzales, about a national agreement.

Misionero is a member of the California agreement, and Canales said it has improved food safety and quality since its inception because it establishes a baseline from which all companies operate. Canales said because all businesses in the industry suffer during an outbreak or recall, the agreement is necessary to ensure everyone follows the highest standards and uses best scientific practices.

"We can't afford that as an industry," he said.

Michael Boggiatto, president of Boggiatto Produce Inc., an LGMA member, said the agreement is a sign to retailers and consumers that California growers are serious about providing a safe product.

"The odds of something happened are very slim," Boggiatto said.

Tags: food safety, lettuce, salad mix, traceability

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April 17, 2009

To Fill Food Safety Gap, Processors Pay Inspectors

By ANDREW MARTIN

HURON, Calif. — Clipboard in hand, Debra Anderson spent three hours one recent sunny morning trooping through a field of romaine lettuce looking for trouble.

She searched for animal tracks at the Church Brothers field, watched picking crews wash their hands and sampled rinse water to make sure it had enough chlorine to kill germs. Though she is a California state employee, Ms. Anderson was working on behalf of the food industry, part of the latest experiment in improving safety.

With huge losses from food-poisoning recalls and little oversight from the federal Food and Drug Administration, some sectors of the food industry are cobbling together their own form of regulation in an attempt to reassure consumers. They are paying other government agencies to do what the F.D.A. rarely does: muck through fields and pore over records to make sure food is handled properly.

These do-it-yourself programs may provide an enhanced safety level in segments of the industry that have embraced them. But with industry itself footing the bill, some safety advocates worry that the approach could introduce new problems and new conflicts of interest. And they contend that the programs lack the rigor of a well-run federal inspection system.

“It’s an understandable response when the federal government has left a vacuum,” said Michael R. Taylor, a former officer in two federal food-safety agencies and now a professor at George Washington University. But, he added, “it’s not a substitute” for serious federal regulation.

Nonetheless, the approach is spreading. After two salmonella outbreaks earlier this decade, the almond industry developed a pasteurization program that is overseen by the federal Department of Agriculture. The Florida tomato industry, implicated in several salmonella outbreaks, persuaded the state to take on the task of regulating food safety on farms and at packing houses.

In California, the “leafy greens” industry, which grows spinach and lettuce, was desperate after a 2006 outbreak of a harmful strain of *Escherichia coli*, the intestinal germ. As Americans stopped eating spinach for weeks, the industry suffered \$100 million in losses. It now pays the state money so that auditors like Ms. Anderson can inspect farm fields for safety. The arrangement is called the Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement.

Arizona created a similar leafy greens agreement, and plans are afoot to expand it nationwide. Other food industries have expressed interest in the leafy greens model.

“They realize they can’t sit back and wait” for an outbreak to occur, said Thomas A. Nassif, president and chief executive of the Western Growers Association, who recently outlined the leafy greens program to representatives of the peanut industry, subject of another recent recall. “It will be expanded.”

The leafy greens agreement and others like it are an outgrowth of the nation’s hodge-podge food safety system, which roughly splits oversight between the Department of Agriculture — responsible for meat, poultry and some egg products — and the FDA, which is supposed to monitor the remaining 80 percent of the food supply. But where the Agriculture Department employs a field force of 7,800 to inspect all the cows, pigs and chickens that are carved into packaged meats, the F.D.A.’s 1,307 inspectors rarely lay eyes on the vast majority of the products they are entrusted with keeping safe.

For many years, the food industry lobbied against initiatives that would have strengthened the F.D.A.’s oversight. But industry attitudes are changing as food-borne pathogens turn up repeatedly in foodstuffs once regarded as safe, like peanuts and pistachio nuts, costing those industries millions in lost sales.

With public confidence in the food supply on the line and little appetite for new regulations during the Bush administration, industries went looking for other government agencies that might provide a semblance of oversight.

California’s leafy greens industry turned to 1930s-era laws, passed at the national level and by some states, that allow produce sectors to work together to solve marketing problems. Called marketing agreements or marketing orders, they allow industry to create regulations that are then enforced by government auditors.

Historically, such programs were used to set minimum quality, size and grade requirements for fruits and vegetables and to standardize packaging. But now, they are being adopted to impose safety requirements.

While lauding the recent impulse to act, several food-safety experts said they were troubled leaving safety to industry discretion.

“Industry self-regulation didn’t protect our money, and industry self-regulation won’t protect our food,” said Carol L. Tucker-Foreman, a safety advocate with the Consumer Federation of America, in an e-mail message. “We want every inspector to be paid by and owe their loyalty to the people who eat, not to the owner of an unsanitary produce packing operation. You can’t work for both.”

But defenders of the programs said they were the best option available in lieu of tougher federal regulation, especially given chronic shortfalls in government budgets. Besides, the new approach is working, said Scott Horsfall, chief executive of the leafy greens program. In the two years since it started, there has been no new outbreak tied to California leafy greens.

Dr. David Acheson, the F.D.A.’s associate commissioner for foods, said he believed the marketing agreements were a positive step by industry to improve the safety of their products. But he said the new administration was taking a more proactive approach that he hoped would include new food safety standards and more inspectors.

“I do see us in a new environment,” he said. “Clearly the direction we are headed, and we need to head, is the government setting the right standards and holding industry to it.”

Under the agreement, the produce industry pays the California Department of Agriculture about \$1 million a year to perform about 500 inspections, a fifth of them unannounced. Participation in marketing agreements is voluntary, but in California, more than 95 percent of the leafy greens industry signed up, in part because major processors like Dole and Fresh Express agreed to participate. Produce growers had little choice but to follow.

While critics maintain that marketing agreements are not tough enough, Ms. Anderson's audit the other day of the Church Brothers' lettuce fields appeared to be painstaking. (It was announced in advance, and she had a newspaper reporter and photographer in tow.)

Sporting a deep tan and a hairnet, Ms. Anderson, 55, inspected the perimeter of the romaine lettuce field for tracks, because animals can spread germs on produce. She inspected the workers' toilets. When a field test suggested the water used to rinse lettuce might not be killing germs, she briefly halted the operation. (It turned out a worker had used the wrong test strip.) After completing her field inspection, Ms. Anderson combed Church Brothers' records.

The problems she discovered were minor. Nonetheless, Mr. Horsfall said the company was expected to fix them, and auditors would check again. If violations are serious, a grower can be tossed from the program. So far, six participants have been thrown out, mostly because they repeatedly failed to solve minor problems.

"We want them to be successful," said Steve Thomas, Ms. Anderson's supervisor. "But the facts are the facts."

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Fresh Talk Blog Chat - Hank Giclas

Published on 04/30/2009 02:56pm By Tom Karst

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I had a chance to chat on April 28 with Hank Giclas, vice president of strategic planning, science and technology for Western Growers, Irvine, Calif.
11:07 a.m. Tom Karst: Thanks for taking time from your busy schedule for a Fresh Talk chat. I like to ask people how they first connected to the industry. How does your story go in that respect?

11:08 a.m. Hank Giclas: I have always been interested in a career in agriculture...my family owns a small farm in Buckeye AZ where I first got the bug in my teens...working there during the summer!

11:09 a.m. Tom: What kind of farm was it and is it still in the family?

11:11 a.m. Hank: It is currently in alfalfa and it has typically been a cotton and small grains rotation although we have grown many crops including fresh produce like lettuce and melons (which we never successfully sold...even though we produced great crops) My father brother and I are now partners in the farm.

11:13 a.m. Tom: So you grew up n Arizona. Did that mean ASU for college? How soon after schooling did you find Western Growers?

Hank: That experience got me interested in arid lands agriculture which is what I studied in college at the University of Arizona. I graduated with a BS in Ag education and taught vocational agriculture prior to coming to Western Growers in 1990.

11:15 a.m. Tom: Right. You were ahead of me. And U of A is the Ag school - not to be confused. Do you miss teaching? What attracted you to Western Growers?

11:19 a.m. Hank: I don't miss the bureaucracy of the education system... and I feel like my work with Western Growers affords me great opportunities to employ an educator's skill set ... with a different audience than high school students. I was attracted to Western Growers by an opportunity to work as a "public affairs" director which meant taking agricultural messages germane to the association to policy makers and the public.

11:20 a.m. Tom: What's a typical week like for you? Do you find yourself in Washington and Sacramento a fair amount?

11:22 a.m. Hank: I do travel considerably. Some to Sacramento and Washington ...but most of my travel is to areas where our members are engaged in the difficult issues of the day ... for example this week will be in Bakersfield and Salinas...

11:24 a.m. My days are never boring ... in the Science and Tech unit we deal with a myriad of issues that change constantly ... who would have known when I walked in on Monday that we would be getting calls on swine flu for example... and I am working on food safety initiatives, sustainability work, water quality issues to name a few of this week's focal points...

11:26 a.m. Tom: I know you have been active on the progression of the national leafy greens marketing agreement. Do you think it is possible the USDA will publish a proposal for a national leafy greens marketing agreement this year? Are you optimistic it will be well received by growers outside of California?

11:29 a.m. Hank: While I have been an active leader in the development of a proposal for a national leafy greens marketing agreement (modeled after California and Arizona's successful efforts) there are many allied organizations across the country that are also involved... I hope that this will help in the reception that it receives when an official publication/proposal comes from USDA. I certainly expect that this will occur this year and I am actually hopeful that it will happen in the next few months.

11:30 a.m. It is important for it to be formally noticed and published to get it out and about for people to talk about it and hopefully embrace.

11:33 a.m. Tom: A related question, perhaps - and one relevant to the recent Global Conference on Produce Food Safety Standards at United. Do you think the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement and the related Ariz. effort have cut down on redundant food safety audits? Do you see that as a possible outcome of a national effort?

11:37 a.m. Hank: I think that there has been some limited progress in reducing the number of audits for leafy greens companies/farms as a result of the California and Arizona agreements. There is much that still needs to be done in this area. The existing LGMA is speaking now with buyers as part of their efforts to encourage further reductions and the establishment of a national program will hopefully strengthen the rationale for one standard and audit program. That is one of the intended outcomes.

11:39 a.m. Tom: I have kept you a while. Thanks for your time. One last question: If the swine

flu were to have some impact on the industry, where do you think we would see it - trade, labor, or something else?

11:44 a.m. Hank: I think, as with many issues, some folks (over?) react based on media hyperbole and not facts. We have heard that some buyers have been seeking assurance that produce is not a vehicle for transmission of influenza ..despite the fact that CDC has said food is not a vehicle. This forces a whole lot of people to expend resources to answer these questions in an effort to calm or quiet unfounded fears...another typical day at the office!

11:45 a.m. Tom: It's good you are there to cut the rumors off at the pass. Hopefully we won't see this swine flu have a profound effect on our economy.

11:49 a.m. Hank: I too hope the swine flu does not expand and cause further illness and that in the short term clear messages about its causes and preventive measures are sent out ... to me it goes back to what mom said..."wash your hands" "cover your mouth" etc...

11:50 a.m. Tom: Never go wrong listening to mom. Thanks again for your time, Hank

Hank: You are quite welcome!

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