

Testimony of John M. McClung

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Leafy Green Vegetables Handled in the US

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My name is John McClung; I am president and CEO of the Texas Produce Association, headquartered in Mission, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley. The association represents the interests of growers, shippers, importers, marketers and processors of fresh fruits and vegetables from Texas and Latin America. I have the honor today to also speak on behalf of the Texas Vegetable Association.

My purpose is to encourage adoption of the proposed leafy greens rule.

We in Texas clearly understand the need to assure the consuming public that fresh produce is as safe and wholesome as good science and good growing and handling practices can make it. We have worked with other organizations nationwide to develop the proposed leafy green marketing agreement, and believe it is an excellent vehicle to maximize the safety of the handful of commodities that pose the greatest risk to consumers. We believe that with the help of consistent government oversight, we can drive the risk from pathogens in domestic and imported greens to acceptable minimums.

You will recall that the recent outbreak of disease associated first—and erroneously—with tomatoes, and later with Jalapeno peppers, was traced initially to South Texas and then to a farm in Mexico. That episode badly frightened consumers, and rightly so. It was in the headlines for weeks, and resisted a rapid withdrawal of tainted peppers from the marketplace because government was unable, for a long while, to identify the offending commodity. That event eroded public confidence, badly damaged the tomato and pepper industries,

embarrassed the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control, outraged the food advocacy community and the U.S. Congress, and further stained the reputation of imported produce, specifically Mexican produce. But, if we can learn from it, and implement safeguards as a result of it, perhaps all is not lost.

The proposed rule would, at the industry's recommendation, introduce a blueprint for safety that will cause growers and shippers to voluntarily adopt good growing practices and good handling practices in their day-to-day activities to a degree that has not consistently occurred in the past. Ironically, the U.S. food supply, including leafy green vegetables, is remarkably safe now. But public tolerance for perils in the food parents provide their children every day is exceedingly low, and the industry must recognize that reality and respond to it. I, and many others in industry, believe that can best be done using a government structure laying out expectations. As a marketing agreement, participation would be voluntary, but once a shipper/supplier agrees to abide by the terms, that handler agrees to a mandatory framework, which includes requiring that the handler source from certified growers. It is my belief that retailers, food-service operators and other buyers will quickly demand that their suppliers are signatory to the agreement.

That said, some details of the agreement as currently written may be subject to amendment. For example, the "metrics" for growing and handling should reflect regional differences; ideal agricultural practices in a given area depend on water quality, bacterial load in the soil, regional weather, water drainage and other variables. As a result, a one-size-fits-all model does not work optimally.

A second concern for Texas is the treatment of imports. During the past couple of decades, Texas has gone from being the number three state in produce growing and marketing to somewhere below number ten. But, we currently ship more fruits and vegetables to the rest of the nation than we ever have. That is because nearly 60 percent of the produce we ship, including leafy greens, is grown in Mexico. We have become importers more than growers, although we still grow very substantial volumes of many fruits and vegetables. If you get behind the

numbers, you discover that it is the same individuals doing the importing, and growing in Mexico, that used to do it in Texas. They grow to U.S. specifications, mindful of U.S. chemical regulations, intending to ship to the U.S. for U.S. consumers. So in a very real practical sense, it is U.S. produce grown in Mexico. But that's a story for another day.

My point is, it is easy to say that imported produce must meet the same standards as domestic produce, but enforcement may not be so easy. For one thing, the government of Mexico may have something to say about maintaining good agricultural practices on Mexican farms. This certainly is not an insurmountable problem, but it will demand the attention to U.S. and Mexican interests to meet the agreement's terms.

While it is important to anticipate and remedy shortcomings in the agreement as they are discovered, we in the Texas/Mexico produce industry see the proposed pact as a strong, effective tool to minimize risk and ensure safe, wholesome food. We are encouraged that both AMS and FDA have endorsed the concept, and are willing to collaborate with us and each other to bring it about. And we thank USDA for the progress to date, including the department's willingness to hold this series of hearings to, hopefully, put the agreement to work for us and for consumers as soon as possible. Thank you for permitting me to speak here today.