

2006 Harvest wrap-up



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Jane Hager shops for a head of lettuce in the produce aisle of Star Market in Salinas on Thursday. In the wake of the bagged spinach E. coli outbreak, the Salinas Valley agriculture industry is working to restore consumer confidence in its products.

Restoring the faith

After E. coli outbreak, industry under no illusions about the challenge of winning customers back

By DAWN WITHERS
The Salinas Californian

The Salinas Valley agricultural industry doesn't underestimate the challenge it has on its hands.

As they try to rebound from the after-effects of the worst E. coli outbreak ever linked to fresh produce, produce industry officials here and throughout the United States are developing a marketing campaign to restore consumers' image of the "salad bowl of the world" as a place of lush green fields producing healthy vegetables for the nation.

The publicity effort will highlight not only the intrinsic safety of domestic produce but what growers are

doing to improve their agricultural practices, industry officials say.

"We're in Phase 2, the recovery phase, the consumer-confidence phase," said Jim Bogart, president of the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California in Salinas.

Winning back the hearts and wallets of consumers won't be an easy task, ag industry members say. Many of them will this week in Las Vegas to discuss details of the marketing campaign as part of the Western Growers Association's annual meeting.

The spinach and to some extent the lettuce industries have taken big financial hits because of the outbreak. Sales of both fresh spinach and bagged salads in general have sagged.

WHAT'S NEXT

Produce industry officials will develop a marketing campaign this year to restore consumer confidence in fresh spinach and other leafy greens.

Bogart, who is attending the Las Vegas conference, said it's the industry's job to make plain to consumers how growers will ensure food safety and what they will be doing differently since the outbreak.

The late summer outbreak, which sickened more than 200 people in 26 states and killed three, traced back to bagged fresh spinach grown in Monterey or San Benito counties and processed at Natural Selection Foods

in San Juan Bautista, federal and state investigators say. In an unprecedented move, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned all consumers against eating fresh spinach during a 15-day period in September.

Initial research into consumer attitudes toward spinach since the outbreak shows the public is confident about the safety of spinach and bagged salads but unsure when they want to start buying them again, said Kathy Means, vice president of government relations for the Delaware-based Produce Marketing Association, which has committed \$1 million to food-safety improvements and research.

See FAITH, Page 5

Food safety merits close look, firms say

Staff and wire reports

Some things make Jim Lugg very nervous.

As food safety chief for Salinas-based Fresh Express, the nation's No. 1 maker of packaged salads, Lugg looks hard at cattle, wildlife, water and humans.

All can spread the E. coli bacteria that in late summer tainted fresh spinach, killing three people and

sickening more than 200 others.

State and federal investigators hunting for the outbreak's source have said they found the same strain of E. coli in cattle manure on an unidentified ranch somewhere in Monterey or San Benito counties.

The ranch is right across a paved road from what was a spinach field.

While investigators haven't said how far apart the field and pasture are, the situation is one that Fresh Express and other Salinas Valley value-added produce processors try to prevent.

"We wouldn't like that at all," Lugg said.

Fresh Express requires spinach or lettuce fields to be several hundred feet from pastures — often more —

to lessen the chance that E. coli in manure could be spread to fields by cattle, wildlife or water.

The restriction is one of dozens of safety steps that Fresh Express requires of lettuce and spinach growers who supply it with produce, and of companies that harvest and ship the product.

See SAFETY, Page 5

INSIDE



IMMIGRATION

Chances of Congress passing immigration reform legislation appear dead in the water for this year, regardless of the outcome of Tuesday's election/Page 3

RECAPPING 2006

Bad weather at the wrong time of the season and the nationwide E. coli outbreak were just a couple of the reasons 2006 will not go down as a banner year for Salinas Valley agriculture/Page 4



WINE CROP LOOKS SOLID

While 2006 may have been a difficult year for Monterey County's produce industry, things appear to be developing better than expected for the Salinas Valley's wine industry, vintners say/Page 6



AG MONDAY

Meet Froylan 'Froy' Vargas, branch manager of Delta Rubber in Salinas and the subject of this week's profile, and sample all of the other standard features of Ag Monday, including the Almanac and Joli Spencier's In the Fields column/Page 8