

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Food Safety Working Group

The July 21, 2009 romaine lettuce recall by Tanimura & Antle puts another exclamation point on the issue of food safety. The lettuce was being recalled because of a positive result for Salmonella on a random test conducted by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture. As of Sunday, July 26, 2009, the recall had not been posted on the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) "2009 Recalls, Market Withdrawals, & Safety Alerts" website even though Tanimura & Antle posted it on their site on July 21.

When President Obama established the Food Safety Working Group in the White House, he said, "We are a nation built on the strength of individual initiative. But there are certain things that we can't do on our own. There are certain things that only a government can do. And one of those things is ensuring that the foods we eat...are safe and don't cause us harm."

On July 1, 2009, the Food Safety Working Group issued a preliminary report of key findings and a schedule of actions that would be taken by agencies of the federal government (<http://www.foodsafetyworkinggroup.gov/ContentAboutFSWG/HomeAbout.htm>). In the overview, the group wrote, "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention...[has] concluded that the 'lack of recent progress points to gaps in the current food safety system and the need to continue to develop and evaluate food safety practices as food moves from farm to table.' It is estimated that one in four Americans suffers from a foodborne illness every year."

In its report to the President, the group "identified three core food safety principles to guide the development of a modern, coordinated food safety system:"

- Preventing harm to consumers,
- Strengthening surveillance and enforcement based on good data and analysis, and
- Improving response and recovery to outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

The group identified two biotic agents-Salmonella and E. coli O157:H7-for special emphasis, as these agents are responsible for a large number of foodborne illnesses each year.

According to the report, "Salmonella bacteria cause an estimated 1.3 million illnesses each year in the United States - including fever, diarrhea, and even death." Eggs are a leading cause of Salmonella illness. The FDA is issuing a final set of rules to control Salmonella contamination of eggs during production, which it estimates will reduce the number of illnesses by 79,000 each year.

In the meantime, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety Inspection Ser-

vice (FSIS) is in the process of developing new standards to reduce the prevalence of Salmonella in turkeys and poultry. As part of the process, the FSIS will establish a Salmonella verification program with the goal of having 90 percent of poultry establishments meeting the new standards by the end of 2010.

The working group reports that "the bacterial strain called E. coli O157:H7 causes diarrhea, abdominal pain, and fever in approximately 70,000 Americans each year. In an estimated one in 15 patients, a frightening complication called Hemolytic-Uremic Syndrome develops. Patients with this complication can suffer intense pain, high blood pressure, kidney failure, and even death."

To reduce these illnesses, the FSIS is stepping up its enforcement in beef facilities, which will include increased sampling, especially on the components that go into making ground beef. At the same time the FDA will "draft guidance on preventative controls that industry can implement to reduce the risk of microbial contamination in the production and distribution of tomatoes, melons, and leafy greens."

The group calls for the development of a national traceback and response system because, "when people begin to fall ill after an outbreak occurs, time is of the essence." This system will include:

- Developing industry product tracing systems,
- Creating a unified incident command system,
- Strengthening the public health epidemiology program,
- Updating emergency operating procedures,
- Improving state capacity, and
- Using new technologies to communicate critical food safety information by creating an improved individual alert system.

An improved food safety system also calls for better coordination across federal agencies to ensure that they are sharing information. Additionally, the FDA and the FSIS will add new personnel responsible for food safety.

Because part of the fragmentation of food safety among a dozen federal agencies is due to laws, "the administration will work with Congress on critical legislation that will provide key tools for FDA, FSIS, and the federal government to keep food safe."

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Originally published in *MidAmerica Farmer Grower*, Vol. 29, No. 31, July 31, 2009
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