

Experts fear spinach scare may dampen bagged salad market

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SALINAS, Calif. - The nationwide E. coli outbreak from bagged spinach could seriously dampen the popularity of prewashed, packaged salads with time-pressed and diet-conscious Americans, food safety and marketing experts say.

The Food and Drug Administration's announcement Wednesday that the bug that sickened hundreds of people matched a strain found in an opened bag of Dole spinach may eat away consumer's confidence in a \$2.8 billion-a-year industry built on convenience and good health, observers said

"This stuff is supposed to be triple-washed, whatever that means, but E. coli is still getting into it," said Marcia Mogelonsky, a Mintel International research analyst. "I'm afraid with this new food fear, people are going to stop eating salad because even if its in a bag they are going to have to wash it and it becomes inconvenient again."

While the consumer alert issued by the FDA applied to both loose and packaged spinach, the latter is more likely to remain under suspicion because large processing plants bring together salad greens from sometimes dozens of farms before bagging them, said Michael Pollan, author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma."

But that kind of highly centralized food system creates the perfect conditions for spreading contamination over a wide area, as with the latest outbreak, he said.

"If the whole country is washing its lettuce in the same sink, any problem in that sink is going to affect a lot more people," Pollan said.

So far, there has been no evidence the source of the outbreak can be traced to the packaging process or that the salad bags themselves breed bacteria such as E. coli, which is found in animal and human waste.

Besides visiting Central California produce processing plants in their search for the outbreak's source, federal and state inspectors are looking at nine local farms that supply them with spinach. The inspectors are looking at such factors as irrigation water, fertilizer, worker hygiene and whether livestock got into fields.

Natural Selection Foods, the California company that processed and packaged the spinach that has been the focus of the outbreak investigation, said Wednesday that an independent laboratory it hired took samples from the company's San Juan Bautista plant last week and no contamination was found.

"Our factories are clean," said Samantha Cabaluna, a Natural Selections spokeswoman. "That makes us suspect it is emanating from the fields."

Seattle lawyer Bill Marler, who has represented dozens of clients in lawsuits connected to contaminated bagged leafy greens, said he's representing more than 30 clients from 12 states over the current E. coli outbreak. He said he reached a settlement for his clients with the company in five previous cases, but could not reveal its terms.

Based on past experience, Marler said he suspected bacteria-tainted irrigation or flood water is probably behind the current outbreak.

"Plants like spinach and lettuce can absorb not just water but bacteria," Marler said. "All the washing and rinsing and triple washing and nice bags with smiley faces on them mean nothing because the product is then just a little tiny bomb waiting for someone to eat it."

But Jerry Welcome, executive vice president of the United Fresh Produce Association, said consumers are probably better off eating bagged spinach that's been processed in a climate-controlled factory, staffed by machines and workers in sterile uniforms, than bunches plucked from a farmer's market.

"It's not the bag that causes the problem. What causes the problem is where you get the pathogen on the product," Welcome said. "That's why you have to find it in the field and take care of it in the field."

California produces 74 percent of the nation's fresh spinach crop. The Salinas Valley accounts for roughly three-quarters of the state's share and has been the focus of the investigation.

Packaged greens, a category the industry calls "value-added" produce, was invented by a Salinas company, Fresh Harvest, in the late 1970s. Today, leading processors such as Fresh Express, NewStar and River Ranch Foods are based in Salinas.

According to Mogelonsky, the research analyst, nationwide sales of prewashed salads grew from \$1.7 billion in 2001 to \$2.6 billion last year. Bagged spinach, a separate category, grew from \$111 million in 1999 to \$286 million in 2004.

"It was projected to keep growing, and now it's not going to," she said.

Associated Press Writer Marcus Wohlsen in San Francisco contributed to this story.