

By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Correspondent

WASHINGTON, Sept 29 (Reuters) - Fresh spinach is safe to eat in the United States because all E. coli-tainted spinach has been recalled, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said on Friday.

But the FDA said serious concerns remained because so many outbreaks of food poisoning in fresh greens such as spinach and lettuce have been traced to California farms. The current outbreak, which dates back to mid-August and hit 26 states, may have killed as many as three people and put 97 in the hospital

California's food industry needs to address the issue and tougher regulations may be needed, said the FDA's Dr. David Acheson. But consumers can safely eat fresh spinach again, he told reporters in a telephone briefing.

"The spinach that is going to come on to the market next week or whenever is going to be as safe as it was before this outbreak," Acheson said. "But ... there are some longer-term issues that need to be addressed."

The outbreak had been traced to fresh spinach processed by San Juan Bautista, California-based Natural Selection Foods LLC. The company said on Thursday that the FDA had found no contamination by toxic bacteria at two plants and that they were bacteria-free.

Acheson denied this.

"I don't know who gave them this information but it is incorrect," he said. "The information I have here is that the Natural Selections facility is still under investigation."

He said all the spinach implicated in the E. coli outbreak had been traced to Natural Selection Foods. Many of the bags had been sold under the Dole brand name Acheson said food growers and processors will have to change some of their practices, although it is not yet clear which ones.

"The FDA and the state of California have previously expressed serious concerns with continuing outbreaks of foodborne illness associated with the consumption of fresh and fresh-cut lettuce and other leafy greens," Acheson said.

"And as part of our longer term strategy, FDA and the state of California expect industry to develop a plan to minimize the risk of a further outbreak of E. coli 0157 not just in spinach but in all leafy greens including lettuce."

He said this was the 20th outbreak of E. coli 0157:H7 in leafy greens in 10 years, and half had been traced to central California.

"What it does is it raises concerns about what is going on in that environment," Acheson said. For instance, cattle may need to be kept away from fields where food is grown, and physical barriers may have to be used, he said.

E. coli is a common and usually harmless bacteria found in the guts of animals including people. The 0157:H7 strain can be toxic and is found in the intestines and manure of cattle.

"Having cattle that may or may not be carrying 0157 that are uphill and upstream of a field that is growing a fresh product that is going to be consumed without cooking obviously raises concerns and questions," Acheson said.