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contact: April Ward
april@lgma.ca.gov

Leafy Greens Farming Community to Use Clues from FDA Report to Prevent Future Outbreaks

Sacramento, CA – California leafy greens growers are pledging to incorporate findings from a report issued today by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) into its ongoing process to strengthen required food safety practices on farms.

“As leafy greens farmers, we work hard every day to follow the best-known food safety practices,” said Dan Sutton, general manager of Pismo-Oceano Vegetable Exchange which grows leafy greens in San Luis Obispo County. “Clearly we need to look even beyond our own farms to help us prevent future outbreaks. Information from this new FDA report will be extremely valuable as we further strengthen our practices both in and around our farms.”

Leafy greens growers have been working to continually improve their safety record as the industry has experienced repeated foodborne illness outbreaks associated with romaine lettuce over the past two years. The FDA report issued today relates to what was actually three distinct outbreaks all occurring in the Fall of 2019.

According to the FDA report, the outbreak strain related to one of three outbreaks was detected in samples taken from a cattle grate on public land near a produce farm. Other STEC strains, while not linked to any of the three outbreaks, were also found in proximity to where romaine lettuce crops were grown.

As a result, FDA considers adjacent or nearby land used for cattle grazing as the most likely contributing factor associated with these three outbreaks.

The leafy greens industry hopes to learn more about how leafy greens are being exposed to pathogens like e. coli in the environment and on land surrounding farms through a series of research projects. A project to gather samples and collect data is now underway in Arizona in cooperation with producers, the University of Arizona and the FDA.

“A similar study is being developed to perform research in California’s central coast growing areas with an eye toward considering preventative controls that may be necessary on land surrounding our farms as well as additional controls on the leafy greens farms themselves,” said Robert Verloop, COO and General Manager of Coastline Family Farms. “The study would be done in cooperation with FDA,



the California Department of Food and Agriculture, academia and the leafy greens industry. We're hopeful this kind of work can be done to provide us with answers to help prevent future outbreaks."

"Even before these last outbreaks occurred, the leafy greens industry had launched a comprehensive process to review and update required food safety practices included under the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement (LGMA)," said Scott Horsfall, CEO of the LGMA, a food safety program which establishes uniform standards for how leafy greens are farmed and then verifies practices are taking place through mandatory government food safety audits of leafy greens farms.

A series of subcommittees has been appointed to review practices in all areas. Water continues to be a focus of this effort and Horsfall noted the industry is in the process of considering some 30 changes to further update practices for water used in farming leafy greens. Other subcommittees on soil amendments and sanitation have been meeting for weeks and a subcommittee on proximity to animals and adjacent land use is being appointed this week. All subcommittees are suggesting updates to strengthen existing requirements.

More information about the collaborative process for updating required food safety practices for leafy greens can be found [here](#).

"The goal is to create unified standards for how leafy greens are farmed using the best science and expertise available," said Horsfall. "We will be relying on information supplied by FDA, scientists and others to help us improve these practices so we can further protect consumers."

Horsfall explained leafy greens producers who sign-on to the LGMA agree to follow a set of science-based practices that require them to implement over 300 different food safety checkpoints in nine different areas including: general requirements; records, personnel qualifications and training, environmental assessments of the farm and adjacent land use, agricultural water, soil amendments & non-synthetic crop treatment, worker practices, field sanitation and transportation

Under the LGMA program each member company is audited by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) an average of five times per year and they must be in full compliance with all 300 food safety checkpoints. Any member who does not comply is decertified from the program and their company name is shared with retail and foodservice buyers and the public.

"The real benefit of the LGMA system is that farmers clearly understand what practices are required. When new information is learned, the standards can quickly be updated and adopted throughout the industry," said Horsfall.

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