

Some say food safety regulations threaten wildlife

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By Jane Palmer

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Wildlife and the environment may suffer unnecessarily if the Department of Agriculture decides to take the California food safety regulations nationwide in 2010, local farmers and officials say.

The food safety regulations, termed the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, were put in place after an outbreak of E. coli in spinach in 2006. Three people died in the outbreak, and more than 200 people were hospitalized.

While the roots of the contamination were traced to a farm in the Salinas Valley, just how a field of leafy greens became contaminated with E. coli was less clear.

Scientists found the same strain of E. coli in cow and pig feces near the field of contaminated spinach, and officials at the California Department of Health Services eventually thought wild boars were responsible. Boars had traipsed across the field and officials believed they carried the E. coli on their hooves.

Consequently, a focus of the regulations has been on making some of the local environment inhospitable to wildlife. Farmers have been encouraged to remove the natural vegetation surrounding fields of leafy greens that provides food or habitat for wildlife.

Now, farmers across the country are waiting to see whether the USDA will institute a National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement based on the Californian model. The decision, expected to be made soon, may involve similar regulations on farms throughout the nation.

Jo Ann Baumgartner of the Wild

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Farm Alliance questions those regulations.

"There has definitely been an impact on the environment," Baumgartner said. "And it's counterproductive for food safety."

Baumgartner points to research by scientists at UC Davis that states that the surrounding grasses and wetlands have the ability to filter up to 99 percent of E. coli when it rains.

"There is science to support that these strips of vegetation prevent the movement of pathogens," said Andrew Gordus of California Fish and Game. "If you keep filtration systems in, you help prevent those pathogens from moving downstream."

Dale Coke, owner of Coke Farms in Watsonville, notes that it is not just E. coli that washes downstream.

"If you've sprayed your fields, it goes into the water system," said Coke, who chose not to sign the agreement and abide by its rules. "All these pesticides and fertilizers will just end up in the streams and in the oceans."

Eighty-nine percent of farmers in the Central Coast have removed vegetation around fields destroying animal habitat, according to a survey by the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County. Gordus believes they have been pressured to do so by buyers who have signed onto the agreement.

"They don't tell them go cut that tree down," Gordus said. "They'll tell the farmers, I'm not going to buy your crop because you have got those trees there."

Wildlife isn't all that suffers from such actions, Gordus said.

"That tree was a spot where owls and raptors can roost and protect the farmer's fields from rodents," Gordus said.

Moreover, wildlife such as deer don't pose any risk of contamination, Baumgartner said. In April 2009, the California Department of Fish and Game released a preliminary report stating that only 0.5 percent of wildlife carry E. coli and no deer were carriers.

But Coke's main reasons for not signing the agreement were not only a consideration for the environment. He believes the regulations are simply an attempt by the major processors to market a perception of food safety and capture a larger share of the market.

Coke believes that it is the cutting and bagging of lettuce that leads to the spread of contamination: cut surfaces of greens are like a seeping wounds that invite infection and the bags are like incubators for the pathogens, he said.

Any food safety regulations that fail to address bagged lettuce is severely missing the mark, said Coke.

"I didn't sign it because it just didn't make sense," he said.