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Tailing Virulent Veggies

Produce Industry Develops Means to Pinpoint Origin Of Contaminated Products

By JANE ZHANG
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Hoping to restore consumer confidence and protect itself from lawsuits after repeated outbreaks of food-borne illnesses, the produce industry is getting down to basics: Keeping better track of where and how its food is grown and handled.

Dole Food Co., the world's largest producer of fresh vegetables, recently started using radio-frequency identification tags to track leafy greens as they move from fields to trucks and through processing facilities. The system will allow Dole, whose bagged spinach was implicated in the September E. coli outbreak that killed three people and sickened more than 200, to trace contaminated produce not only to a particular farm, but also to a specific part of a field, says Eric Schwartz, president of Dole fresh vegetables.



Dole workers in Yuma, Ariz., scan RFID tags.

At the same time, Western Growers, whose members grow, pack and ship half of the nation's fresh produce, is helping develop a global-positioning system enabling growers to track their goods through the supply chain. In addition, many big produce buyers are spelling out how growers should monitor their farms for possible sources of contamination, including wild hogs and deer, flooding and polluted irrigation water -- and insisting on guarantees that the directions are followed.

The goal is to make it easier to trace the source of contaminated produce and fix the problem. "We all understand that what happened in September 2006 cannot happen again," says James R. Gorny, senior vice president for food safety and technology at United Fresh Produce Association, a Washington-based trade group.

For decades, the produce industry has prided itself on its nimbleness -- its ability to move large amounts of perishable products quickly across the country. Sometimes, careful record keeping has taken a back seat. That lack of a paper trail has made it harder for companies and the government to find the causes of an outbreak.

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For the last 22 major outbreaks involving leafy greens, regulators haven't been able to pinpoint the farm involved. "Because of the problem with record keeping, we are not able to trace back to a single location," says Jack Guzewich, director of emergency coordination and response at the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. "We end up with multiple locations, multiple farms. And we have to visit them all."



Spinach was removed from shelves in 2006.

In the spinach investigation, regulators have narrowed it down to four farms and say cattle manure, wild pigs and other environmental problems were potentially responsible for the contamination. Now the FDA and state officials are trying to figure out whether the source of the problem was all of those farms, or just one of them.

In the pastures of one of the farms, investigators found a strain of E. coli that matched the organisms found in the contaminated spinach and the stricken consumers. Still, the FDA isn't ready to exonerate the other farms, Mr. Guzewich said.

The sources of two subsequent E. coli outbreaks -- one at some of **Yum Brands Inc.**'s Taco Bell restaurants involving lettuce and another at some outlets of Taco John's International possibly involving iceberg lettuce -- haven't been found.



A 'scanning gun' transmits data to the company's central system.

Consumer doubt about fresh produce is a drag on sales, industry officials say. Sales of fresh-cut salads by supermarkets, excluding Wal-Mart Stores Inc., were down 6.2% in December from the year before, according to market-researcher Information Resources Inc. At the same stores, sales of packaged fresh spinach in December were 34% below the year before.

Better records will help identify sources of contamination, but "won't address the underlying cause of contamination," says Caroline Smith DeWaal, food-safety director of Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer-advocacy group. She says her group has petitioned the FDA and the state of California for mandatory food-safety standards, such as setting limits on the use of manure by growers and requiring hand-washing facilities for workers who handle produce.

The produce industry is split on government regulation. Officials at the United Fresh Produce Association say they want national standards. In California, a state senator has proposed legislation that would create a raft of new regulations for that state's leafy green produce.

But Western Growers is emphasizing self-regulation, at least for now. Under a voluntary marketing agreement, participating handlers of leafy green vegetables agree to buy supplies only from farms that follow specific safety procedures. In return, those handlers are given the right to use a seal showing that their products meet new safety standards.

The voluntary sign-up has covered 96% of fresh produce grown in California, and the group hopes it will lead to a national food-safety standard including mandatory inspections and a trace-back system, says Tim Chelling, a Western Growers spokesman.

Processors, in particular, have a legal and financial interest in keeping closer tabs on their supplies. For years, processors, often under tight deadlines, have mixed supplies from different growers to meet retailers' demands for items of specific size, color or ripeness. As a result, they sometimes don't have written contracts or other records indicating the origins of foods they sell distributors. If a food-borne outbreak occurs, the processor could end up holding the bag, facing the prospect of lawsuits and even bankruptcy.

The Bioterrorism Act of 2002 requires food processors and shippers -- but not growers -- to keep records showing where they get their produce and to whom they sell it. But such records often fall short in helping determine the sources of contamination.

Moreover, with different companies using different record-keeping systems, "it's almost like 9/11, and all the different responders have different frequencies so they can't talk to each other," says Andrew Weisbecker, a lawyer at the Seattle law firm, Marler Clark, which represents victims of food poisoning and has already filed 10 lawsuits related to the spinach outbreak.

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