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Spinach Industry Priority: Regaining Consumer Confidence

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The entire produce industry has joined together to put public health first and to maintain public trust since the spinach crisis began in mid-September. The past several weeks have been trying times for all who bring fresh spinach from the field to consumers.

Summary of Sequence of Events

This brief sequence of events is provided to help clear the way for consumers to once again feel confident that the spinach they consume is safe. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has cleared all spinach, other than product originally recalled by its supplier.

It is quite unfortunate that something went wrong in one processing plant on a single day, August 15, 2006, when a single lot of spinach was shipped which sickened 204 people in 26 states and one Canadian province, and left three people dead. In mid-September, U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) officials issued a sweeping recommendation against eating fresh spinach, after linking it with the outbreak. The industry issued a recall on September 15, 2006. Days later, the FDA narrowed the source of the problem to California, and by the end of the month, lifted warnings against eating spinach.

Keep in mind that shipments before and after the lot which was shipped by that one plant on August 15, 2006, were consumed without any problems. Spinach is safe to consume. The industry has risen to provide additional safeguards to help insure that the product remains safe.

Good Agricultural Practices

Spinach is healthy, safe to consume and very important to Texas. Over 20,000 stories were written about the spinach outbreak. There is no doubt that this incident will cause fundamental food processing procedures to change. The industry is concentrating on how to prevent the next one.

The Wintergarden Spinach Producers Board has prepared a detailed document outlining Good Agricultural Practices which will be implemented to insure minimizing pathogen contamination in fresh market spinach production. The document includes instructions for worker hygiene, sanitary production practices, sanitary harvest procedures, sanitary post harvest/packing shed practices and sanitary procedures to transport product to the market, as well as a check lists of critical hazard control points. While this document is still in draft form, it is based on concepts to reduce microbial contamination which may be reviewed in the November 2006 issue of Vegetable Production and Marketing News at the following website:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/extension/newsletters/vpmnews/tamuhort.html>

Production Adjustments

While the problem was created that one day in California, spinach growers outside of the Salinas Valley were not immune to the fallout after the outbreak. Producers and shippers have lost product and money and hope that the crisis will subside by the time winter crops are ready for harvest.

Brian Mizokami, owner and president of Uvalde, Texas-based Pentagon Produce Inc., was quoted in the October 23, 2006 issue of The Packer that he had 25 loads of spinach from his Colorado fields destined for a repacker in Pennsylvania when the ban was announced. The repacker shut down the day of the Food and Drug Administration's alert in mid-September. According to the article in The Packer, Brian said, "It was over 682,000 pounds of spinach, worth about \$250,000." Brian is quoted as saying, "We're in flux, and we'll just

have to see how it plays out.” “We’re planting about 20% less acreage right now. We’ll space planting every five days until about Thanksgiving. Then we’ll start again for another few weeks in December.”

Spinach plantings in Texas are continuing on schedule without any plans to reduce acreage.

Meanwhile, retail outlets have restocked spinach since early October. Produce managers indicate that while the volume of sales is not as high as the pre-crisis’s volume, sales are actually gradually gaining momentum as consumers regain confidence in the product.

Spinach Production

Spinach production is vital to the Southwest Wintergarden region of Texas where almost 90 percent of the spinach produced in Texas is grown. While California now dominates spinach production, producing about 71 percent of the 890 million pounds of spinach produced in the U.S. in 2004, Texas produced about nine percent with a farm gate value of about \$12.6 million and an industrial economic impact of about \$44.1 million to communities supporting the industry in Texas. (Figure 1).

