

Leafy Greens Food Safety TASK FORCE

ABOUT THE LEAFY GREENS FOOD SAFETY TASK FORCE

The Leafy Greens Food Safety Task Force was designed to assess and address issues associated with recent foodborne illness outbreaks attributed to consumption of leafy greens and to prevent such a tragedy from occurring in the future.

California and Arizona produce over 50 billion servings of leafy greens every year to American consumers. The leafy greens community shares a common goal to strengthen the way our food is grown, harvested and distributed. The purpose of this Task Force is to sharpen our food safety systems through the entire supply chain.

TASK FORCE MEMBERS AND WORKGROUPS

Taskforce Membership includes 134 individuals who are representatives of:

- Growers and Shippers from Arizona, California and other production regions (70)
- Produce industry and related trade associations (20)
- State and local government agencies (10)
- Scientists and researchers (4)
- Consumer advocacy groups (3)
- The produce buyer community (15)
- Industry suppliers (12)

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) served as technical and informational advisors to the task force.

The below organizations make up the steering committee of the Leafy Greens Food Safety Task Force.



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WORK OF THE LEAFY GREENS FOOD SAFETY TASK FORCE

The first meetings of the Leafy Greens Food Safety Task Force were held June 5 and 6 in Salinas, California. The June 5 meeting was attended by 20 members of the Task Force's Steering Committee including representatives from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control. During the second day of meetings, the steering committee was joined by 50 additional stakeholders from throughout the produce industry and buying community.

All attendees participated in a wide-ranging discussion on the outbreak, the investigation, traceability and potential root cause hypotheses. The Task Force agreed that smaller breakout groups will focus on key areas including: analysis of weather/climatic/growing conditions and other farm factors; traceability; and communication with government agencies.

In June and July the task force work groups conducted a total of 16 meetings.

- 2018 Outbreak Workgroup: July 5, July 12, July 19, July 26
- CAFO Workgroup: June 29, July 5, July 12, July 19, July 27
- Seasonality Workgroup: July 2, July 12, July 23
- Traceability Workgroup: June 21, July 6, July 13, July 20
- Communications Workgroup: July 23

Meetings were held via conference call and webinar. Work group members were able to consider and discuss hypothesis that were outlined. As a result of the Work group meetings multiple recommendations were brought before the full Task Force for consideration at a meeting July 31 and August 1 in Yuma, AZ.



Close to one hundred members of the Leafy Greens Food Safety Task Force gathered in Yuma, AZ July 31 and August 1 to finalize their recommendations.

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LEAFY GREENS FOOD SAFETY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Leafy Greens Food Safety Task Force met this week for the second time in a two-month period to make recommendations aimed at preventing another foodborne illness event like the recent multi-state outbreak associated with romaine lettuce from Yuma, AZ.

Members of five Work Groups appointed by the Task Force spent thousands of hours in the past few weeks reviewing data provided by government investigators and considering possible factors that may have contributed to the contamination of romaine that led to an outbreak of E. coli O157:H7.

Identifying the specific cause of this outbreak has been difficult because a significant volume of leafy greens is produced in the Yuma region. It has been challenging to pinpoint what practices or conditions could only have affected a small percentage of romaine believed to be responsible for illnesses. Therefore, the Task Force's recommendations are based on a wide range of factors.

Some of the issues currently being considered by the Task Force include:

- The propensity for romaine lettuce to experience a condition called “epidermal peel” which, under some unusual conditions, may have allowed the pathogen to enter leaves
- The role unusual weather such as high winds and/or frost may have played in this outbreak
- The proximity of a large concentrated animal feed operation to leafy greens fields in the area
- Testing by federal public health agencies that identified the presence of the E. Coli genetically-linked to the strain causing the outbreak in canal water used in farming activities
- Difficulties experienced by government investigators in tracing romaine lettuce implicated in the outbreak through distribution channels
- The need for improved communications with government agencies

The Leafy Greens Food Safety Task Force is recommending several action items aimed at improving the safety of leafy greens including immediate changes to the food safety practices, or metrics, required by the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreements in California and Arizona.

Additionally, the Task Force is recommending updates to some of the Guidance Documents which specify “best practices” for LGMA members. A number of research needs have also been identified and the Task Force will continue to work on several ongoing issues and actions.

A complete list of Task Force recommendations is below.

LEAFY GREENS FOOD SAFETY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

SUGGESTED CHANGES TO THE LGMA METRICS

- Update Best Practices for 1) Environmental Assessments and 2) Climatic Conditions/Environmental Conditions
- Require SOPs to evaluate Climatic Conditions/Environmental Conditions
- Change traceback requirement by removing “when available” language
- Update Appendix C: Sampling Protocol (based on raw product sampling survey)
- Create a new appendix to the guidance that includes adoption of the “traceability” vision and best traceability practices (Global Food Traceability Center)

INDUSTRY GUIDANCE AND TRAINING

- Obtain & document data on late season growing conditions and practices
- Outbreak 101 sessions for key leaders and industry
- Develop a traceability training for retailers/food service
- Develop guidance for growers operating near CAFO’s
- Develop product sampling protocol

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH NEEDED

- Irrigation research for the impacted area
- Freeze mitigation strategies
- Weather data/sensors
- Ag water treatment/irrigation water
- Air/soil sampling
- Pathogen mitigation/mitigation strategies
- Dispersion, deposition and survival studies
- Current industry practices (surveys)
- Historical data findings

ONGOING EFFORTS

- FDA/CDC/industry quarterly meetings
- Review/analysis of additional data on past outbreaks
- Create training programs related to seasonality for growers, handlers, harvesters, auditors and others
- Strengthen audit oversight during periods of concern
- Define proactive industry effort to assist during outbreak investigations
- Define reactive “seal team” concept for industry and agencies
- Participate in ongoing traceability discussions