

Californian farmers committing agricultural suicide

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By GARANCE BURKE

FRESNO, Calif. Dec 8, 2006 (AP)— An E. coli outbreak that has sickened nearly five dozen people in the Northeast is prompting concern among West Coast farmers after officials announced that scallions suspected as carriers of the bacteria came from a Southern California farm.

The green onion link to the infections mostly of customers at Taco Bell restaurants in the New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia areas hasn't been confirmed. But some experts say the questions already have cast a shadow on an industry still recovering from a similar bacterial outbreak traced to locally grown spinach.

"Even if it turns out that the implication to green onions doesn't hold up, a lot of damage is done," said Trevor Suslow, a vegetable specialist at the University of California, Davis. "It certainly heightens concern and undermines confidence among consumers and buyers about the safety of products coming from the state."

Testing by an independent lab found three samples of green onions that appeared to have a harsh strain of E. coli.

But FDA spokesman Michael L. Herndon cautioned: "All we have been given is presumptive evidence only from a contract lab whose results we can't confirm."

Federal authorities said Thursday there were no plans to issue warnings about scallions.

Taco Bell, an Irvine-based unit of Yum Brands Inc., told customers that in addition to getting rid of its green onions from all 5,800 of its restaurants, it sanitized the affected restaurants and set up a toll-free number for people to call with concerns.

Ready Pac Produce, the sole supplier of green onions to Taco Bell restaurants, stopped scallion production at its Florence, N.J., plant,

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where the vegetable is washed, chopped and packed.

"As soon as we heard news from Taco Bell about the positive yet inconclusive results, we took immediate action to do everything we could," said Steve Dickstein, marketing vice president for Irwindale-based Ready Pac, one of the nation's leading produce packers.

The suspect scallions were grown by Boskovich Farms Inc. of Oxnard, Dickstein said.

etc.

How many e. coli outbreaks do these people need to see before they clean up their operations? The farm owners should be charged and jailed and lose their land. Maybe that'll send a message to the rest of them to clean up their operations. Or test their produce for e. coli on site. How hard would that be to do?

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