

Taco John E. coli outbreak receives scrutiny

Florez decries "lack of transparency" shown by withholding of violation data

SACRAMENTO - Senator Dean Florez, D-Shafter, will hold a hearing Wednesday in Sacramento on the investigation of the Taco John E. coli outbreak linked to California lettuce, as well as the status of the Leafy Green Marketing Agreement (LGMA) - the industry's effort to self-regulate in the critical area of food safety.

Florez expressed his disappointment today that the LGMA failed to provide the Senate Committee on Food-borne Illness with requested documentation on citations issued under the agreement between July and December of 2007. In their recent status report, LGMA indicated 368 inspections were conducted in that time period, leading to 457 citations and the decertification of three participants. Only a handful of those reported citations were referenced in the materials LGMA ultimately provided to the committee, with no explanation for the missing data.

In a letter today to LGMA executive officer E. Scott Horsfall, who is scheduled to testify Wednesday, Florez expressed his concern that LGMA's failure to fully comply with the committee's request reflected the group's "lack of transparency" and damaged legislators' confidence in the voluntary program. Florez reiterated his request that Horsfall provide the requested documents to the committee at the hearing. A copy of the letter is attached.

More than 81 people were sickened by the late-2006 Taco John E. coli outbreak, with 26 requiring hospitalization and two suffering hemolytic-uremic syndrome, which can lead to kidney failure. A 41-page report issued just weeks ago by the Food and Drug Administration and the California Department of Public Health (DPH) indicated irrigation water for the lettuce may have been compromised by two neighboring cattle operations.

Panelists will include Dr. Jeff Farrar, chief of the Food and Drug Branch of DPH, and Nate Dechoretz, director of Inspection Services for the California Department of Food and Agriculture. In addition to Horsfall, LGMA will be represented at Wednesday's hearing by chairman Joe Pezzini and former Assembly member Barbara Matthews.

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WHO: Senator Dean Florez, D-Shafter
Chair, Senate Select Committee on Food-borne Illness
WHAT: Informational hearing: "A review of the investigation
into the Taco John E. coli outbreak, and a status report on the Leafy Green Marketing Agreement"
WHEN: Wednesday, March 12, 2008
10:00 a.m.
WHERE: State Capitol, Room 3191; Sacramento, CA