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It Only Takes One

IT'S been about a year and a half since the reports of *e. coli* in bagged spinach came to a head. Since then, the source of the contaminated product was identified, bagged spinach is back on the store shelves, and the leafy greens industry is moving forward with a marketing and handling agreement that has the potential to expand from California and Arizona to a nationwide program.

Problem solved, right?

Wrong. Or so I learned while attending a vegetable growers' meeting in New Jersey last month. Upon arriving at the show, one of the first presentations I heard was from Perry Bowen, a leafy greens grower who, in just a half-hour or so, managed to provide a huge dose of reality to the growers in attendance.

Bowen's family has been involved in farming for hundreds of years, so they must be doing something right. While speaking, he recalled leaving a dinner meeting in late 2006, where the topic of conversation was about increasing production, and how the money was going to be spent. When Bowen got to his car, he had several messages on his phone urging him to turn on the evening news.

You probably already know the rest of the story. But for Bowen, it can be summed up in five words: "My world came crashing down."

The Snowball Effect

Despite living thousands of miles from where the problem was traced, Bowen's business took a major hit. His problem illustrates the fact that a food safety problem can snowball enough to cripple you, no matter where you live. Even worse, in the age of 24-hour-a-day news, word will surely travel quickly, as all the public hears is a flurry of negative messages. "Your scare will probably happen when there are no other major news stories to report," Bowen added.

There are, of course, several steps growers can and should follow to reduce the risk that such an incident

takes place at their farm. This includes anything from paying attention to where you're planting, making sure your field and packinghouse equipment are clean, and monitoring where all of your inputs are coming from, while keeping them protected at all times.

However, as we've seen, when a problem does occur, you're going to have to answer for it, even if you didn't play a part in it. To use an example from Bowen, "if you grow blueberries, and there's a problem in blueberries, then you're going to have a problem." To make this situation easier, Bowen suggested you "farm like the satellite trucks (i.e., the news crews) are coming around the bend, headed toward your farm." In other words, be ready to answer questions as they come.

Aside from this, Bowen also offered several tips you might not normally think of, such as:

- Checking the Web site of the Centers for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov) for health alerts anywhere in the country.

- Make a list of everything you grow, and do a Google search to see if there have been any reported outbreaks related to your crops. After the spinach incident, Bowen did this, and was surprised to find a variety of cases reported in cities across the country. (Incidentally, he also found that, after doing a couple of local media interviews, he found his farm's name showing up on Google several times.)

Spinach growers, or any other type of grower for that matter, may have stories to tell that are just like Bowen's. If nothing else, it helps raise awareness that even it seems like there are no problems, it only takes a matter of minutes for a food safety outbreak to take down an entire industry. Just ask Bowen.

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