

Member Alert

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Statement from Dr. David Gombas
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Several recent Salmonella outbreaks linked to alfalfa sprouts are an important reminder that sprout growers must be vigilant in their food safety practices. United Fresh Produce Association is urging sprout growers and buyers of sprouts to immediately redouble their efforts to ensure that all sprouts provided to consumers have been grown in strict compliance with preventive safety practices prescribed by the Food and Drug Administration.

FDA's [Guidance Document](#) for the safe production of sprouts gives clear direction to seed producers, seed conditioners, distributors, and sprout producers on important steps that must be taken to ensure the safety of sprouts.

In 2003, FDA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the California Department of Health Services and others jointly developed a [video](#) to assist the industry in producing the safest possible products. The video may also be useful for retailers, regulators, and anyone working with the industry that wants to better understand the product and current recommendations for best production practices.

Both of these resources provide guidance regarding the sources of contamination, ways to eliminate potential contamination and methods to detect contamination when it happens. FDA believes strongly in these recommendations and "will consider enforcement actions against any party who does not have effective preventive controls in place, in particular, microbial testing."

Some of the basic controls directed by FDA include:

- Seeds for sprout production must be grown under good agricultural practices. Purchasers of seed should request verification from their supplier that appropriate practices were followed.
- Seeds for sprouting should be treated with one or more treatments (such as 20,000 ppm calcium hypochlorite) that have been approved for reduction of pathogens in seeds or sprouts. Some treatments can be applied at the sprouting facility while others will have to be applied earlier in the seed production process. However, at least one approved antimicrobial treatment should be applied immediately before sprouting.
- Microbiological testing of spent irrigation water from each production lot for Salmonella, E. coli O157:H7 (or EHEC), and Listeria monocytogenes. There is a potential that pathogens may survive antimicrobial treatments, even if used properly, so testing becomes the last chance to detect contaminated lots. Because testing for pathogens can be done with irrigation water as early as 48 hours into what is generally a 3 to 10 day growing period, producers who plan accordingly can obtain test results before shipping product without losing product shelf-life. Testing, whether done by the producer or contracted out, should be done by trained personnel, in a qualified laboratory, using validated methods.

Given the importance of these preventive controls, United Fresh recommends that all retailers and foodservice buyers ensure that sprouts they purchase have been grown in accordance with these control steps.

Experience over the past decade has shown that sprouts can be produced safely when in compliance with these preventive controls. It is the responsibility of all parties in the sprout supply chain to ensure that these preventive controls are in place to protect consumers, and to protect the overall industry's ability to provide healthy, fresh sprouts to the public.

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