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Advocate slams food safety plan at USDA hearings in Monterey

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MONTEREY — A representative of organic farmers warned Wednesday that creating a national version of California's Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement would discriminate against small-scale organic farmers.

The California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement is a set of food safety measures adopted by the agricultural industry in 2007 after a 2006 E. coli O157:H7 outbreak was traced to Central Coast spinach. Participants in the agreement adhere to practices that help to minimize the spread of bacterial contamination in leafy green vegetables through water, soil and handling.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has scheduled a set of hearings to address a proposed national version of the agreement, with the first of the hearings taking place in Monterey this week.

On Wednesday, Steve Etko, coordinator of the Washington, D.C.-based National Organic Coalition, testified against the proposal, saying it would be "crippling to small- and medium-scale farmers, confusing to consumers, and a highly inefficient and ineffective way to address food safety concerns."

Western Growers, a marketing coalition serving the growers and producers of most California and Arizona produce, represented the proponents of the national agreement at Wednesday's hearing.

"We're not talking about taking California standards and applying them nationally," Paul Simonds, the Western Growers communications manager, said in response to Etko's testimony.

"It isn't a one size fits all situation."

Etko referred in his testimony to a survey of California leafy-greens growers conducted by the Small Farm Program at the University of California, Davis. According to the survey, 2007 compliance with the state agreement cost about twice as much per acre for growers with revenues under \$10 million.

Costs are "not necessarily insurmountable" for small farmers, said Frank Giclas, vice president of science and marketing for Western Growers, during a break in the hearing.

Participation in both the state marketing agreement and the proposed national agreement is nominally voluntary. Yet participants in the state marketing agreement represent 99 percent of the leafy greens produced in California, according to the California LGMA Web site. Etko argued that industry and buyer pressure would force most leafy-greens handlers to comply with a national marketing agreement.

Gary Peterson, deputy director of a Salinas-based nonprofit that supports fledgling organic farms, said he did not know of any small organic farmers who felt pressured to join the state marketing agreement. Yet Peterson cautioned against public confusion between marketing and food safety.

Compliance with a leafy greens marketing agreement "should not be used as a promotional label," Peterson said in a phone interview.

Dale Coke sells produce from his own farm and from other organic farms throughout the Central Coast. Coke, who testified on Wednesday, said in a phone interview that he lost \$50,000 worth of revenue last year because Canadian buyers refused to purchase greens that were not compliant with the state marketing agreement.

The Agricultural Marketing Service, a branch of the USDA, is administering the hearings, which began Tuesday and will continue through Friday. Etko questioned the propriety of USDA leadership in the development of food-safety standards, a role normally assigned to the Food and Drug Administration.

"We do not believe that AMS has the capability to develop good safety regulations," Etko said.

Western Growers and AMS representatives acknowledged their lack of scientific expertise and expressed a desire for the participation of scientists and smaller and organic growers in the development of national guidelines.

"We want to develop a program that works for everybody," Giclas said.
