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Of Feds and Farms

Local growers boo the new U.S. House-approved food safety bill.

Posted August 20, 2009 12:00 AM

By Zachary Stahl



Salinas lettuce grower Dirk Giannini says the FDA recalls ruin company credibility and brands.

Neither small organic farmers nor large industrial growers in Monterey County are cheering a landmark federal food safety bill making its way to the U.S. Senate. The big growers don't like giving the Food and Drug Administration more power to recall products and

quarantine entire growing areas – like the Salinas Valley – and the small farmers don't want to see unfriendly environmental practices – like deer fences – go national.

Both groups want to keep the feds off their farms.

The Food Safety Enhancement Act of 2009, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives July 30, would require more inspections of processing plants, mandate food safety plans, allow the FDA to order recalls and impose a \$500 fee on food processors. The legislation is in response to several high-profile food-borne illness cases, like last fall's 46-state salmonella-poisoning-from-peanut-butter spate to the 2006 E. coli outbreak linked to Central Coast spinach.

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Dirk Giannini, manager of Salinas lettuce grower Christensen and Giannini, says the FDA isn't up to the job.

"The product has already been done and gone when they do these recalls, and they are ruining company credibility and their brands," he says. "They can't move as fast and handle information that private industry manages. Yes, we are all for food safety, but you know what? Let us do our job."

Bob Perkins, executive director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau, adds the FDA often can't pinpoint the source of an outbreak and wrongly blacklists commodities, like in 2006 when the FDA initially linked a Taco Bell E. coli outbreak to green onions, later changed it to lettuce, and never found a definitive source.

But national trade groups like the United Fresh Produce Association endorse the bill: "United Fresh is gratified by the House passage of this landmark food safety legislation, which contains several important provisions designed to improve our nation's food safety and help bolster consumer confidence in the food supply," says association President and CEO Tom Stenzel in a prepared statement.

The new bill would allow the FDA to set standards for growing and harvesting crops. The FDA recently issued voluntary guidelines for the growing and processing of tomatoes, leafy greens and melons. Most large-scale California growers already follow industry-developed practices outlined in the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement. The fear of wildlife contaminating fields has led many local growers to build fences and tear out riparian habitat.

“The small farmers can’t afford to do that,” says Dave Runsten, policy director for California Alliance with Family Farms. “They can’t afford to build fences and do all these different things, and the organic farmers can’t be ripping out all this habitat.”

Several members of Congress, including Rep. Sam Farr, tried to amend the House bill to make it less onerous on small farms by calling for the protection of wildlife and biodiversity, and establishing a sliding scale for the processing fee. But the changes didn’t come in time.

Gary Peterson, deputy director of Agriculture Land-Based Training Association in Salinas, says the trace-back requirements included in the bill don’t make sense for farmers selling to local markets and restaurants.

“The fact is that small farmers really do not require electronic tracing systems that would be required of large companies,” he says. “[The legislation is] a one-size-fits-all solution.”

Peterson adds the FDA should focus on regulating the handling and processing of crops – not growing them. Perkins also doesn’t like the idea of the feds telling people how to farm: “Every part of the country has different circumstances where uniform standards probably wouldn’t apply.”

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