

Produce Industry Moves to Protect Consumers in Response to Romaine Outbreaks

In April, two leafy greens industry groups moved to join the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement (LGMA) to add additional measures to curb conditions that could contaminate produce, spark illness outbreaks and maintain customer confidence. The move was in response to three consecutive E.coli outbreaks in Romaine lettuce.

Signing on to the additional standards are the Produce Marketing Association (PMA) and the United Fresh Produce Association. These two entities also co-chaired the Romaine Task Force in the development of new agricultural water standards. More than 50 billion servings of lettuce and leafy greens are grown annually in California and Arizona. About 95 percent of all lettuce produced in the U.S. is grown in the two states.

The California LGMA was originally formed to cooperatively place stricter food safety standards post the 2006 E. coli outbreak from Spinach. While water testing requirements for pathogens have been in place for some time for LGMA. However, this April the group moved to add additional safeguards to its standards. These safeguards will require growers to characterize, treat, and monitor all forms of surface water used for overhead irrigation of leafy greens within 21 days of harvest. Growers must consider when and how it is applied to crops, conduct testing to be sure the water is safe for its intended use, and sanitize the water if necessary and verify all precautions are taken.

On average, LGMA growers and distributors are audited five times a year to verify their compliance with the agreement's science-based food safety practices and for standards that meet or exceed the federal Food Safety Modernization Act's (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule. The FSMA Produce Safety Rule includes agricultural water requests, but the agency opted to postpone the compliance dates. Except for sprout growers, large produce farms are not required to comply with the agricultural water requirements until Jan. 26, 2022. Small farms have until Jan. 26, 2023; and very small farms have until Jan. 26, 2024.

Additionally, the LGMA has made multiple changes to their standards. California has imposed larger growing area buffers between fields and feedlots with more than 1,000 animals. Arizona also has an LGMA, and they have strengthened equipment cleaning requirements, required specific action involving wind or flooding events, imposed mandatory traceability measures, and added buffers on feedlots.

"This means that every box of leafy greens placed into commerce by a certified LGMA member will now be produced under new, more stringent requirements," said Scott Horshall, CEO of the LGMA for California. "We have effectively changed the way leafy greens are farmed."

