



July 1, 1998

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Dockets Management Branch (HFA-305)
Food & Drug Administration
12420 Parklawn Dr.
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Rockville, MD 20857

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Re: Docket # 97N-0451

Gentlemen,

Once again California Citrus Mutual representing approximately 800 growers farming in excess of 92,000 acres appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft Guide To Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits & Vegetables. Notwithstanding the following paragraphs, we view this document as a marked improvement over draft one. Please accept the following statements as an effort to help make a good document better.

Your preface regarding the safety of fresh fruits and vegetables is acceptable but the reality is that upon the publishing of these guidelines the natural reaction will be one of suspicion relating to the safety of fresh produce. The "increase in reported outbreaks" leads one to believe that your offices are inundated with numerous reports and crises relating to fresh produce. The reality is something else. Have we even achieved the number 10 as to actual problems? The introduction uses the word "estimates" and acknowledges that hard data is "unavailable."

Why lead the reader to a conclusion which would result in reduced consumption of fresh produce? On one hand we have USDA and the Cancer Society urging greater consumption of fruits and vegetables, and then we have the FDA document in the second sentence questioning the safety of these same products. We're sending a mixed message and while that may not be the intent of the Agency it is the message that alarmists, some media and therefore, many consumers will receive. The Agency is on much stronger ground by justifying the need for these guidelines as an effort to stop a problem before it becomes a crisis. One could easily quantify the amount of product shipped daily and equate that with the amount of tainted product and the percentage is minute. The Agency isn't reacting to a crisis, it's identifying areas of concern that needs to be addressed before a problem gathers momentum.

The last sentence of the preface is inappropriate. Growers should not be asked to teach consumers and retailers the risks regarding food borne illnesses. It's a noble idea regarding education in this area, but placing the burden on the grower community is inappropriate. At a minimum it is a partnership between the private and public sector.

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The paragraphs discussing wildlife diminish the value of the document. The value of the guidelines is reduced if an area is perceived to be ludicrous. Asking farmers to guard against wildlife contamination is not realistic. Growers cannot monitor fields 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 12 months a year. Large farming areas are simply not conducive to monitoring trespassers above, below or adjacent to the cultural area. The document addresses the difficulty, meaning FDA realizes the futility. Why lessen the impact of the document by offering language that draws ridicule?

The language discussing “trace back” provisions needs less bias. Our industry is justifiably proud of its trace back capabilities. We developed our system as a result of pesticide concerns and it is easily adaptable to microbial contamination. The strawberry example cited and the following paragraphs automatically lead a reader to assume that the problem is always at the grower level. Language needs to be inserted that recognizes physical handling occurs in the field or at the packinghouse. It also occurs at the retail level, to a much greater degree, and therefore, whether it is employees’ or consumers’ contamination it is equally viable at this level. The communication of a contamination is critical or more strawberry horror stories will result. This is a good place to start.

In our view there are numerous declarative statements which can lead the consumer, or the reader, to false assumptions. For example statements regarding animal or human feces (a major source of contamination) have not been documented. This can be a source, but how many cases have been established within the fresh produce industry? Or, “food may never be free of microbial hazards” is another real confidence builder.

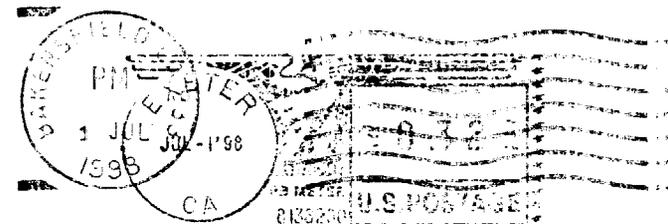
For these reasons Citrus Mutual strongly urges the Agency to consider utilizing focus groups to determine whether the desired message is actually being conveyed and/or received. Ask a cross section of industry, media and consumers their understanding of the messages contained within this document. We all have readily seen in the preparation of this document that what you wished to convey was no where near the message being received.

A major tenet of communication expertise is insuring that the message is received. Just relaying the words is not a certainty. A test with a focus group(s), because of the scope and potential impacts, is justified.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel Nelsen", written in a cursive style.

Joel Nelsen
President



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