

A Leafy Greens Food Safety Task Force has been formed in the U.S. to assess and address issues associated with foodborne illnesses following a deadly E. coli outbreak linked to Arizona-grown romaine lettuce.



The move was announced by the Arizona and California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreements, the Produce Marketing Association (PMA), United Fresh Produce Association, Western Growers and other industry stakeholders.

California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement CEO Scott Horsfall told *Fresh Fruit Portal* the formation comes as a response to the recent outbreak, which led to one death and sickened more than 170 people across 32 states.

"Early on, after the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] and the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] made their initial announcements, there was a lot of talk about 'how do we move forward?'," he said.

"Everybody was waiting to see what the investigation would show, but I think there was a recognition fairly early on that we needed to bring a group together that could really look at the issues involved and hopefully come up with some recommendations."

Task force members will include growers, shippers, trade associations, government agencies, scientists and buyers, and there will also be collaboration with the CDC and FDA.

Horsfall said it remains to be seen what the task force will be able to determine, but he explained discussions would be wide-ranging.

"The traceback investigation on this particular outbreak is, to date anyway, somewhat inconclusive, but...the programs we have in place in California and Arizona are largely focused on prevention, and that's where we're going to start," he said.

He added that "time is of the essence" in establishing recommendations and bolstering food safety systems.

"They've finished shipping out of the desert this year, but they'll be making planting decisions in a matter of months and so we want to do everything we can to reach some kind of resolution before they get into the next season," he said.

There is a general commitment to doing whatever necessary to prevent foodborne outbreaks in the future, he said, adding that outbreaks like the recent one had far-reaching effects.

"It didn't just affect Arizona growers - it affected shippers out of California. The market definitely was affected by it...so everybody recognizes and everybody's committed to doing whatever we can to overcome the problem," he said.

This week the steering committee was announced, which has been formed to facilitate the task force's efforts and oversee the process.

The steering committee will be co-chaired by Jerry Muldoon of Dole Fresh, Arizona, and Steve Church of Church Brothers, California.

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