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***Company leader speaks about E. coli outbreak in spinach***

By Mandy Gross, FAPC Communications Services Manager

STILLWATER, Okla. – The one thing a food company dreads the most is getting a call from its state’s health department about a possible foodborne illness outbreak caused by one of its products.

In many cases, companies are not willing to speak about outbreaks; however, some companies focus on communications to manage through a crisis.

That is exactly what Natural Selection Foods, located in San Juan Bautista, Calif., did when an *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 outbreak was linked to its fresh spinach sold under the Dole brand.

“One of the first things we did was notify our key stakeholders, which included customers, media, employees, growers, vendors and government,” said Will Daniels, quality, food safety and organic integrity vice president for Natural Selection Foods/Earthbound Farm.

Daniels recently spoke during the Food Industry Trends Conference in Oklahoma City, sponsored by the Robert M. Kerr Food & Agricultural Products Center, Oklahoma Department of Public Health, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, the Oklahoma Department of Commerce and the Charles B. Browning Endowed Professorship. The conference focused on regulatory changes, food safety issues and solutions, and food traceability technologies.

“Food processing establishments face dozens of possible crises or unexpected events that can cause the public to lose its trust in the company and the products produced,” said Jason Young, FAPC quality management specialist. “By preparing for a crisis in advance, companies can contain and minimize losses.”

Daniels said on Sept. 14, 2006, the company received a call from the California Department of Health Services about a possible *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak. The first thing the company did was activate its incident management team to decide the next step.

“With information still coming in from the Centers for Disease Control and the FDA, we opted to go to a voluntary recall because it was the right thing to do for our customers and public safety,” Daniels said.

After notifying the company’s key stakeholders, the company followed its incident management plan. This plan consisted of guiding principles for appropriate communications responses to the customers, media and employees; an effective mechanism for assessing the seriousness of the incident; and a basic checklist and tools to ensure the company’s response was coordinated and conducted properly.

Daniels explained the company used the 5 R's to manage through the crisis: regret, responsibility, restitution, resolution and reform.

### **Regret**

It was important for the company to express empathy to the victims of the *E. coli* outbreak, Daniels said. The company immediately sent letters to its customers with information on the product recall.

“We worked with the media to get a message out about contaminated products and instructions of how to handle them and set up a 1-800 number for customers to call about questions and claims,” Daniels said.

### **Responsibility**

Since public safety is the top priority of the National Selection Foods/Earthbound Farm, the company worked with investigators to find the source of the outbreak.

Daniels encouraged other food companies that if they are involved in a foodborne illness outbreak, it is the best interest of the public and the food company to give the investigators the information they need to find the source.

“Food safety has always been an integral part of our business,” Daniels said. “Our systems have consistently been at the top of the industry, but we believe that even the best food safety standards require continuous improvement.”

### **Restitution**

Following the outbreak, the company was committed to taking care of the needs of its customers.

“We made an offer early on to reimburse any out-of-pocket medical expenses from anyone who had been affected by the outbreak,” Daniels said. “We gave our retail customers specific assurance that we would give full credit for recalled products and offered to cover cost of returning product and disposal.”

### **Resolution**

National Selection Foods/Earthbound Farm has invested in a Quality Assurance and Organic Integrity Program, which Daniels was named vice president. The company has directed resources toward this program to establish and develop the company's testing program, state-of-the-art laboratories and trained staff.

“We've enhanced our food safety program to unprecedented levels in the produce industry,” Daniels said. “We're committed to continually improving it as food safety science advances.”

The company has formed a food safety advisory panel that includes some of the country's leading food safety scientists to help develop its entire food safety program, Daniels said.

Other programs that have been added or reviewed include a seed-to-harvest plan for enhanced good agricultural practices, raw product test and hold program, enhancements in the packing facilities and finished good test and hold program.

The company is using the data from its test and hold program to better understand how to prevent outbreaks.

**Reform**

Daniels said that Natural Selection Foods/Earthbound Farm must define a pathway forward. This includes recognizing that *E. coli* O157:H7 exists in the company's environment and pathogens in raw materials are a hazard likely to occur.

"We must test as a processor to detect, so we can prevent," Daniels said.

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