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## HOW SAFE ARE WE, OR WILL WE BE?

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Food safety—and the way Americans think about it—will be one of the foremost issues for this year, according to experts in the private and public sectors. When leafy green vegetables are killing people, it's time to take a stand, they agree.

Already in the working stage is a coalition of New Jersey state departments, food and educational leaders gathered to boost the idea—and practice—that food safety is the last line of defense to staying well and living well.

“New Jersey has been active on the food-safety front for many years, including third-party auditing and our Jersey Fresh quality standards,” said Charles M. Kuperus, secretary of agriculture. “Building on a history of safe produce, we cannot become complacent.”

His remarks came on Dec. 13 when his department joined up with Health and Senior Services to form a Produce Safety Task Force, aimed at protecting consumers while helping local producers adapt to what will be new safety standards in the industry, standards still being formulated

Also in on the new state task force are food and produce industry leaders statewide and Rutgers University's Food Policy Institute and Extension Service.

It appears this liaison was forged at a fortuitous moment.

As recently as last Thursday, the Food and Drug Administration said it was okay to eat meat and drink milk from cloned animals. Although the advisory won't come up for official approval for several months, it's something else for the American consumer mind to absorb.

This after last's week's pronouncement from the Food & Water Watch—a grassroots environmental advocacy group out of Washington, DC—about alleged contamination dangers from imported shrimp, espe-

cially, they say, from the coasts of Thailand, Vietnam and Ecuador.

For Jeff Beach, spokesman for the state Department of Agriculture, this initiative couldn't come soon enough.

“We realized there would be some new regulations and new standards on food safety being generated on several fronts after the spinach incident from Silicon Valley, California, and the Taco Bell e. coli case,” said Beach.

“These regulations will be generated on the federal level as well as from the industry. They will be coming from several fronts,” he said.

Although the new standards for food safety are yet to be determined, Beach said the department is right now gearing the effort toward fruit and vegetables at the point of production, “to be prepared to meet whatever new standards might be coming about.

“This is the new reality,” he added. There will be increased attention on regulation, from the field where the produce is grown, to where it winds up for sale.

“In general, all portions of the industry and all facets of food production in this country will be under a microscope for awhile,” Beach added.

He's not alone in his hope for toughened rules.

“This is going to be the year when people are absolutely obsessed with safety,” says trendspotter, advertising executive and author Marian Salzman.

“Is our food clean enough? Is it safe enough? This is what people will be asking. They want to make sure the packaging is accurate so they know when the expiration dates really are.

“It's almost like the police,” she said. “The sanitary element and safety of our food is the overlay for agroterrorism. Every

open salad bar in America is a terror hot spot,” she said.

Nipping at the heels of the regulatory agencies for food safety are other organizations and groups hoping to upgrade policies already in use and to press legislators for new ones.

More than two days of intensive educational seminars and workshops with food industry experts will earmark the annual Food Safety & Security Summit being held in Washington, DC, March 6-8.

Organized by food, beverage and packaging professionals, Stagnito Communications of Illinois, the event will bring together more than 170 companies with 50 product categories to take a hard look at the industry as it is now and as they believe it should be, focusing on safety issue reports that are then funneled directly to legislators.

“We feel that security is crucial from the field to the restaurant,” said chief organizer Scott Wolters. “This involves warehousing of the produce, transportation, storage and how it is secured over the time it leaves the field to the time consumers eat it,” he added.

“The ground will be laid in 2007 with some big changes on the way,” said Wolters. “The big thing is traceability.

“This is the issue du jour...the way things are brought to the market. There will be a lot of legislative activity in this area,” he added.

In 2007—although the safety of our food supply seems to be under attack—experts still believe in some of the earlier techniques to help make it even safer.

“The way we bring things to market also depends on processes like irradiation,” said Wolters. “The reality is that it's as safe as pasteurization, but we have to tailor the message to the general public.”

Finally, experts agree, the message is being heeded.