



*Where the subject may be perishable  
but the insight isn't.*

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## **'All Clear' Signal Still Not Given On Sprouts**

*Jim Prevor's Perishable Pundit, May 27, 2009*

Our study of the salmonella outbreak on [Alfalfa Sprouts](#) brought a letter from a producer, both proud of his industry and frustrated with the lack of an "all clear" clarion announcement from the FDA:

*As a sprout grower, I am not against the FDA sending out a nationwide advisory to "Not Eat Alfalfa Sprouts" when consumers have become ill from eating them.*

*I believe that whenever there is an outbreak, everyone involved in the seed supply chain and growing business should cooperate with the Food Officials, State and Federal to the fullest, helping to get to the bottom of the problem.*

*While the search for a source was ongoing, we were happy to have provided to our customers facts and figures showing that we do follow the FDA 1999 Growing Guidelines to a tee and are using the latest testing methods possible.*

*What I am a little disgruntled with is that although the FDA discovered the seed lot numbers, country of origin, the supplier and the growers using it some time ago, and the FDA has acknowledged that it has no information that any lots of seed other than the particular lots implicated are involved in this salmonellosis outbreak, and the marketer of the implicated seed has done a Market Withdrawal, the business has been severely damaged because FDA won't issue an "all clear" press release.*

*We now know that not all, but only some, alfalfa sprouts were involved; the ones that were involved in states such as Michigan did a recall.*

*My congratulations to all in the industry, from the smallest foodservice and retail distributors, to the very largest in the nation.*

*As soon as we, as an industry, were alerted to the situation, without hesitation, everyone was in full agreement to discontinue the sale of alfalfa sprouts until the source of the problem was*

*discovered. This shows that protecting the consumer is our number one priority.*

*It took about 4 days to find the seed source and locate who had it, and few more days to release a letter clearing the seed not involved.*

*Many thanks to the "Pundit" for showing just "How Professional You Are" in times like this, and for your patience during this time.*

*Alfalfa sprouts are one of the great sources for vitamins, and it would be a shame for consumers to forgo such a healthy product.*

*We are awaiting another "Press Release" from the FDA with an "all clear" so that all the consumers who want healthy, safe sprouts to eat can buy them at every local store.*

*— Maurie Thomas  
General Manager  
[Caldwell and Sons, Inc](#)  
Maywood, CA*

We appreciate Maurie Thomas's letter and understand his pride as the industry has moved quickly to help the FDA identify a source for the outbreak. We also understand his frustration as the FDA, even after finding the source, does not seem inclined to ever give an "all clear" to sprouts.

On the FDA's [page](#) regarding this outbreak, this is the message still being given:

*The US Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that consumers not eat raw alfalfa sprouts, including sprout blends containing alfalfa sprouts, until further notice because of a risk of Salmonella serotype Saintpaul contamination. As soon as the source of the contamination is identified, FDA will work with the alfalfa sprout industry to help identify which alfalfa sprouts are not connected with this contamination. Other types of sprouts have not been implicated at this time.*

This implies that the source has not been identified.

Yet, if one digs into the new [Q&A](#) (updated within the last 24 hours) on the FDA web site, one gets this info:

### ***Should I stop eating alfalfa sprouts?***

*FDA has no evidence that alfalfa seeds from other seed lots, or sprouts grown from them, are involved in this salmonellosis outbreak. However, if you plan to buy alfalfa seeds or buy or eat products that contain raw or lightly cooked alfalfa sprouts, including sprout blends, ask your retailer to verify that the product did not originally come from a seed lot beginning with the numbers "032." If your retailer says that the product originated from a seed lot starting with "032," avoid it.*

*If your retailer cannot verify the source of the alfalfa seeds, alfalfa sprouts, or sprout blends containing alfalfa sprouts, FDA recommends that you avoid them, at this time.*

***An important note:*** *Consumers should ask their retailers about the seed lot number, rather than looking for the numbers on packages themselves. Numbers found on packages in stores do not reflect the seed lots from which the product was grown. Therefore, the absence of a number starting with "032" on a package of alfalfa sprouts sold at the retail level is not a reliable indicator that the sprouts are not associated with the implicated seeds.*

*The FDA and CDC recommend that people who are especially vulnerable to infection — very young children, elderly people, and people with diseases that weaken the immune system or who are taking medications for an over-active immune system (like some medications for rheumatoid arthritis) — always avoid raw and lightly cooked sprouts of any kind and any products that contain them.*

*What this basically says is that although the FDA has no reason to think any other sprouts are involved in this matter, it is always skeptical about the food safety of sprouts, so much so that vulnerable people should never eat sprouts.*

The cause of the skepticism? Past outbreaks as the Q &A explains:

***Have other outbreaks occurred from sprouts?***

*Yes. Since 1996, there have been 30 reported outbreaks of foodborne illness for which contaminated sprouts were implicated as the cause. These outbreaks resulted in about 1,800 cases of illness caused by the bacterial pathogens Salmonella species and E. coli O157.*

*In 1999 FDA issued guidance for the sprout industry on how to reduce the risk that their products will become a vehicle for transmitting harmful bacteria and making people sick. The experience over the past decade has shown that the risk of sprouts being contaminated with Salmonella and other bacteria can be lowered if the industry follows these recommendations consistently and properly.*

*Following release of the sprout guidance, the number of outbreaks associated with the consumption of sprouts, and the number of illnesses in an outbreak, appeared to decline. There were no reported outbreaks associated with sprouts in 2005, 2006, or 2007. In late 2008, however, there was one Salmonella outbreak associated with sprouts.*

*This current outbreak is one of two outbreaks in 2009 tied to raw sprouts. The other outbreak was associated with another bacterium, Listeria monocytogenes.*

If it makes Mr. Thomas feel any better, he is in good company. Back in the fall of 2006 during the [spinach crisis](#) the FDA never actually said that spinach was “safe” — all the industry could get, as we mentioned [here](#), was a commitment that spinach was “as safe as it has ever been.”

The bottom line is that all these products that are consumed raw make the FDA nervous. How can it be otherwise? The FDA has a zero-tolerance policy on pathogens, and it knows that even with a cooking kill step, consumers still get sick from hamburger and other foods.

In the case of sprouts, the fact that it is such a small and fragmented industry means that many sprouters fly under the radar and are not commonly inspected. Retailers don't bother, the FDA doesn't have the staff and so, even today, the FDA is not 100% sure all those little guys have returned their seed and are now following FDA recommended procedures.

In the absence of such confidence, we suspect that Mr. Thomas should not hold his breath waiting for some kind of “all clear” signal.

We thank both Maurie Thomas and Caldwell Fresh Foods for helping the industry to think through such an important issue.

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