



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

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Sprouts Round Up

[Fast Testing For Pathogens Necessary](#) recalls how the **[Nunes lettuce recall](#)**, points out the weakness of testing inputs and then seeing results after product has been shipped. Testing on arrival to a processing plant is one way, but our read of the regulatory agencies is that they really want product testing after processing. Results, however, take about 48 hours, so you are talking about the loss of two days of shelf life. If we could speed up test results, it would be better, so I turned to my friend Lou Cooperhouse, Director of the Rutgers Food Innovation Center, and asked him about the prospects for faster testing. He posits that an interesting model in the food industry is the sprouts industry, as sprouts have a very short shelf life and have been implicated in a number of food safety recalls in the past as well. Our frequent correspondent Bob Sanderson at Jonathan's Sprouts was a little skeptical. 10/13/2006

[Pundit's Mailbag – Sprout Lessons Echo Food Safety Dilemma](#) admits we are fortunate here at the Pundit to have been able to tap into the expertise of Bob Sanderson, President of Jonathan's Sprouts. Bob's lived through all this, and so is more attuned to the nuances of food safety issues than many in the produce industry. He gave the introductory talk at the annual convention of the International Sprout Growers Association on July 7, 2006, long before the Buyer-led Food Safety Initiative and the spinach crisis, which we excerpt here. The key issue is food safety. We don't want people to promote food safety as a competitive edge, but if you can't tell consumers that this bag of spinach is worth paying more for, well, why would they pay more for it? And if consumers won't pay more for it, why would retailers? 12/1/2006

[Pundit's Mailbag – Farmers Are Not The Cause Of Food Safety Problems](#) weighing in our coverage of the **[spinach/E. coli O157:H7 crisis](#)** and food safety issues in general is Karl Kolb Ph.D. President and CEO of The High Sierra Group and the American Food Safety Institute, International who sends this letter stating it is not the farmer causing these problems. It is quite a letter and Karl makes several key claims, one being that even after years of attention to food safety issues, most sprout producers are more lucky than food safety conscious and the government focus on seed soaking is misplaced. 1/9/2007

[Pundit's Mailbag – Gatekeepers And Risk Aversion](#) our piece **[Consumer Studies On Spinach Reviewed ... And Costco's Proactive Approach](#)** brought a quick response from John Shelford, President of Naturipe Farms LLC. In it, John segues into the fact that United Fresh has

endorsed mandatory government regulation, a point we covered in [United Calls For Mandatory, Federal, Uniform Food Safety Standards](#). The Pundit endorsed the concept for the same reason John gives: *It seems the only way to really align the regulatory apparatus and the produce industry and thus build regulatory confidence. But the devil is in the details. On the one hand, we have had problems with spinach and leafy greens, tomatoes, scallions, melons, berries, sprouts and almonds. It is a big leap from seven product categories to hundreds of produce items. It may be overreaching.* 2/8/2007

[Pundit's Mailbag — Can Irradiation Follow The Path Of Pasteurization?](#) shared a letter from one of the trade's most intriguing thinkers, Bob Sanderson, President of Jonathan's Sprouts in response to our earlier piece [Raw Milk And Dirty Produce: Perfect Together](#). Coming from the sprout industry, Bob has had plenty of time to think through the implications of various food safety regimens. Bob raises a question about how the very existence of use of technology changes the prism through which we evaluate our environment. He also acknowledges, if we have more outbreaks, this may be the only path open to the industry. 5/4/2007

[Pundit's Mailbag – Food Prices And Free Markets](#) our piece entitled, [Food Shortages? Blame Governments](#) brought several letters including this one from Bob Sanderson, President of Jonathan's Sprouts who always looks at the big picture and often comes from a different perspective. Bob's point about the stomachs of poor people vs. the gas tanks of rich people is certainly emotive, but we think it sets up a false dichotomy. The world does not have some fixed amount of food that must be divvied up according to some system of justice. People grow, say, sprouts in New England because there are people ready, willing and able to pay for them. If they suddenly decided to abstain, it is highly unlikely that this production would be on the next flight to Myanmar. Most likely the sprouts wouldn't be produced at all. 6/3/2008

[Insights On The Alfalfa Sprout Advisory](#) reveals the FDA has issued a consumer advisory not to eat alfalfa sprouts. We turned to frequent Pundit correspondent Bob Sanderson to see if we can find a solution to this long running food safety issue with sprouts and asked Pundit Investigator and Special Projects Editor Mira Slott to see what we could learn. Bob is a real insider with deep knowledge of the business, and he has given us two very simple changes that could make a world of difference. One issue highlighted in our discussion is the blending of seed lots, which makes traceability almost impossible, so the practice should be halted. 4/28/2009

[Recommendation For An 'Appropriate' Seed-screening Program Shows FDA Unwilling To Take Responsibility For Its Recommendations](#) our piece, [Insights On The Alfalfa Sprout Advisory](#) included an interview with Bob Sanderson of Jonathan's Sprouts and revealed an insight into a fundamental food safety problem regarding alfalfa sprouts: Alfalfa seeds are not typically grown for human consumption. We shared our suggestions for a potential resolution and seem to have hit a nerve, as three days later the FDA sent out a [letter](#) to the sprout industry offering vague recommendations. This kind of communication illustrates clearly the enormous frustration of dealing with the FDA and the enormous obstacles the incentives of the FDA pose for food safety. 5/12/2009

[Alfalfa Seed Company, FDA, USDA And Supporting Cast Comment On Seed Withdrawal](#) reminds that the alfalfa sprout industry is operating under an FDA [recommendation not to consume](#) since April 26, 2009. We discussed this issue in [Insights On The Alfalfa Sprout Advisory](#). Then the FDA issued an "[Alert](#)," identifying an epidemiological link between a specific seed supplier and the outbreak. We asked Pundit Investigator and Special Projects Editor Mira Slott to find out more from Lyle Orwig, spokesperson for the Caudill Seed Company. There are several points made in the interview we question. Mira also reached the person at USDA charged with seed regulations and testing, Dr. Richard Payne, Chief of Seed Regulatory and Testing Branch at the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. Finally, Mira sought clarification from the Association of Official Seed Certifying Agencies, Chet Boruff, CEO of the Association of Official Seed Certifying Agencies. Our [interview](#) with Michael McCartney regarding traceability emphasized the importance of starting traceability with the seed. One doesn't have to be a traceability expert to know that if you blend seed you make traceback more complicated. No one knows that the contaminated seeds came from one of two or three fields or farms as opposed to one. So blending seed is a really bad

idea. 5/12/2009

[Testing Sprout Seed Before It Ships](#) describes how when we published our piece, **[Alfalfa Seed Company, FDA, USDA And Supporting Cast Comment On Seed Withdrawal](#)**, we expressed some skepticism regarding some of the claims being made in the interview. Later we ran another **[piece](#)** that demonstrated Caudill Seed Company's claim to not have been "conclusively tied" to the outbreak was, at best, questionable. The Quality Assurance Manager for the North American Division of one of the largest food buyers on the planet also was skeptical and sent us this note mentioning the efforts **[International Specialty Supply](#)** (ISS) has implemented in screening and sometimes even pre-screening seed (before buying them from farmers) that they sell, including sampling every lot of seed. He also sends significant news of the appointment of Dr. Devon Zagory as Director of Quality and Safety at a major sprout grower. 5/20/2009

[Testing Sprout Seeds](#) We've been focusing recently on the food safety outbreak on alfalfa sprouts. Although some of these pieces have been rather technical, we consider it vital that the industry do something to reduce the frequency of these outbreaks. So we have wanted to listen, and we will do a little more of that in this piece. Several readers noted the same issue regarding the math, and frequent Pundit correspondent Bob Sanderson was among the most articulate. We thought the mathematical question a trenchant one and so turned to Bob Rust of International Specialty Supply, LLC to get its take on the matter. 5/22/2009

['All Clear' Signal Still Not Given On Sprouts](#) our study of the salmonella outbreak on Alfalfa Sprouts brought a letter from Maurie Thomas, General Manager at Caldwell and Sons, Inc., a sprout producer, both proud of his industry and frustrated with the lack of an "all clear" clarion announcement from the FDA. The bottom line is that all these products that are consumed raw make the FDA nervous. 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. 5/27/2009

[More 'Summing Up' Of Sprout Situation](#) our continuing analysis of the alfalfa sprout recall brought this letter from a small grower who offers several contributing points to our sprout discourse. As a former sprouter, he explains how he once avoided Caudill, the company at the center of the current controversy, as a seed supplier. He goes on to discuss seed testing procedures, the CA Department of Agriculture's assertion that seed for sprouting and seed for planting are synonymous and grazing in sprout seed fields. He finishes by asking for our own "state of the nation" on produce and food safety. A bit ambitious for a Friday, but we will work on it. 5/29/2009