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Romaine sales still suffering six months after outbreak

October 25, 2018

ORLANDO, FL — Dave Corsi, vice president of produce and floral for Wegmans, told a seminar audience that sales of Romaine are still down 20 percent even as the industry approaches the beginning of the 2018-19 season winter desert deal six months after a *E. coli* outbreak occurred.

Food-safety concerns were top of mind at a workshop session held during the Produce Marketing Association's Fresh Summit, here, Oct. 18.



Bonnie Fernandez-Fenaroli, executive director of the Center for Produce Safety, with panelists Bob Whitaker of PMA, Trevor Suslow of UC-Davis, CPS Chairman Dave Corsi of Wegmans and Doug Grant of The Oppenheimer

Group.

Corsi, the newly named chairman of the industry-wide Center for Produce Safety, was one of the featured speakers, along with other board members and staff from that organization. He said it is a “major concern” that such a large percentage of shoppers have just stopped buying Romaine lettuce because of the reports about the product being the source of the *E. coli* outbreaks in the spring.

Though federal agencies were not able to link the outbreak to a specific farm, they did conclude that tainted canal water in the Yuma, AZ, area was the most likely culprit. Five people reportedly died and more than 200 people became ill.

Corsi said it is imperative that every company follow best practices and do everything it can to eliminate contamination as the effects of outbreaks are devastating on everyone involved, including those sickened, suppliers and sellers.

Panelist Doug Grant of The Oppenheimer Group said every company needs “a food-safety-first focus.” He said each company must implement the latest findings and strictly adhere to best practices. Grant lamented that while CPS and other industry organizations are holding many food-safety seminars, there is still a huge gap between the informed and uninformed.

Grant noted that while there are 16,000 companies handling fresh produce, only hundreds have attended CPS symposiums. He said much more work has to be done to connect industry members with the science.

Corsi agreed that education is key. He said science about best practices is a well-kept secret. “How do we spread the news,” he asked, noting that Doug Grant is heading a CPS task force to tackle that very question.

CPS Executive Director Bonnie Fernandez-Fenaroli spoke to the same theme. She told the crowd that the research being conducted is relevant but urged all to get involved to help focus the research to make it even more useful to their specific issues. She added that research on any particular commodity could relate to many other commodities, as the processes are often very similar.

Trevor Suslow of the University of California-Davis, who is also on the CPS board, spoke of some of the specific action being done with regard to desert production in light of the findings from last season’s outbreak. He said agricultural water is the risk factor at the top of the agenda that needs more work. He acknowledged that researchers have yet to find a foolproof indicator to judge the water that is being used.

While Suslow said that water testing and water treatment are necessary, “we do not have sufficient knowledge [about water] at this point.”

From the audience, Scott Horsfall, manager of California’s Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, said both the California and Arizona LGMAs have extensively researched what happened “and we have improved the processes for this season,” including adding additional buffer zone space between produce fields and livestock grazing fields.

“Quite a lot has been done but we are looking for more research,” Horsfall said.

There was an overarching theme that produce industry members all along the supply chain are

worried about the upcoming desert season. Bob Whitaker of the Produce Marketing Association articulated that investigations “weren’t able to find a smoking gun.” Consequently, there are several theories as to what happened, but no absolute clarity. That leads to uncertainty and has the industry leaders looking at other avenues of remediation.

Corsi said Wegmans is investigating the use of irradiation as a potential kill step for specific fresh produce items, such as fresh juice. He said that the Rochester, NY-based retailer does sell irradiated beef with acceptance from shoppers, so there is at least the potential that the same process could be used with fresh produce and be accepted by consumers. He added that the company is also exploring other kill step options, but did not specify them.

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