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Certified Onions Inc. expecting increase in pathogen testing

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In the wake of a voluntary 50-state recall of red, white, yellow and sweet onions originating from Thomson International Inc. in Bakersfield, CA, an increase in pathogen testing requests is anticipated by Certified Onions Inc. in Nyssa, OR.

Each of COI's members undergoes sampling for off-label pesticide use and for maximum residue levels, and the pathogen testing is available on request.

Kay Riley, founding member and president of COI, said the pesticide residue testing service is utilized on approximately 80 percent of the onion fields in Idaho-E. Oregon's Treasure Valley and can be made available to other onion-growing regions as well. And he said some of the area's sheds routinely use the pathogen testing.

"I'm certain we'll see more pathogen testing this year," Riley said on Aug. 3, adding that *E. coli 157* and *Salmonella* are the two microbials involved.

Harvest is now under way in the Treasure Valley, one of the largest onion-growing regions in the country, with early varieties starting and storage onions shipping later and running through the following spring. COI, which is now in its 12th season of providing pesticide residue and pathogen testing, coordinates efforts with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, Idaho Food Safety Assurance Lab and Analytical Laboratories Inc., both based in Boise.

Idaho Food Safety Assurance Lab performs the pesticide residue testing, and Analytical Labs provides the pathogen testing, which can be extended into the storage period.

Riley, who has been in the onion industry for three decades, said this recall is the first time onions have been named specifically as the potential cause of an illness outbreak.

“They’ve been associated with recalled products in the past but never named as the cause,” he said.

Addressing the late July and early August recall of Thomson International’s onions, which are distributed under 11 brands, Riley said the Food & Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control & Prevention were investigating a multi-state outbreak of *Salmonella Newport*. Canada health agencies had also announced an outbreak in that country, with several hundred reported illnesses in both countries.

He added that although there had been “no absolute proof the illness was caused by onions,” red onions from the Bakersfield operation were seen as a potential link.

Citing a risk of cross-contamination, Thomson International Inc. notified the food agency that had initiated recalling all its onions that might have come in contact with potentially contaminated reds.

The CDC said cases of *Salmonella Newport* began between mid-June and mid-July, with the outbreak identified July 10. As of Aug. 2, no deaths had been reported out of approximately 400 cases across 35 states.

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