UC Agriculture & Natural Resources

Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference

Title

A Grower's Perspective of the Interface between Wildlife and Food Safety

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/80s2253m>

Journal

Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference, 23(23)

ISSN

0507-6773

Author

Giclas, Hank

Publication Date

2008

DOI

10.5070/V423110396

A Grower's Perspective of the Interface between Wildlife and Food Safety

Hank Giclas

Western Growers Association, Irvine, California

ABSTRACT: Issues of food safety related to wildlife are discussed from a growers' perspective. We describe how the "Metrics" are implemented, from an agricultural producer's perspective, and how buyers' decisions influence field practices related to wildlife management. Growers are working together within the current requirements, so that agricultural producers can continue to market products while remaining committed to environmental stewardship and conservation, and to high standards of food safety.

KEY WORDS: California, *E. coli* O157, food-borne illness, leafy green crops, monitoring, research needs, rodent control

Proc. 23rd Vertebr. Pest Conf. (R. M. Timm and M. B. Madon, Eds.)
Published at Univ. of Calif., Davis. 2008. P. 20.

Today, even more than in past times, we recognize that the presence of wildlife in and around fields in which agricultural products are produced represents some level of risk, in terms of food safety. As we have heard, the *Commodity Specific Food Safety Guidelines for the Lettuce and Leafy Greens Supply Chain*, known as "the Metrics" (Beretti and Stuart 2008), represents a recent effort by industry to address this problem of risk.

A few comments about "the Metrics": the Metrics do not drive the conflict that is currently occurring between growers and others involved in food production. In developing these guidelines, the intention was to promote environmental stewardship and conservation, as growers are interested in, and committed to, these values. The Metrics drive a risk assessment approach; the guidelines themselves do not promote a "scorched earth" approach to eliminate wildlife habitat adjacent to crop fields in an attempt to keep animals out of crops. There was never an intention by the guidelines' authors for there to be an over-reaction to risk that is present.

The situation today is that buyers control the practices that occur in the field. Producers' responses and management decisions thus are heavily dependent upon demonstrating practices that assure buyers that the food commodities are safe and free of contamination. There exists a huge opportunity for wildlife scientists to work with growers, in order to develop the specifics of best management practices for controlling the presence of wildlife in and around crop fields.

A brief review of how we got to this point: Everyone is well aware of the recent history of outbreaks of food-borne illnesses, traced to California-grown fresh produce (e.g., *Escherichia coli* O157 contamination of spinach), which have been in the national news. In response to such public health incidents, the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement (see www.caleafygreens.ca.gov) was created. In conjunction, the practice of conducting compliance audits of member growers has been initiated. The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) employs specially-certified inspectors to conduct Leafy Green Marketing Agreement (LGMA) audits. These inspectors operate with oversight from CDFA, but are certified and trained

by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under the auspices of the National Good Agricultural Practice program practices, which incorporate the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Commodity Specific Guidance. Efforts are under way to promote this compliance audit program as a national model; it is currently being used in Arizona, as well as in California.

The audits cover 5 main areas: 1) General Requirements, 2) Environmental Assessments, 3) Water Use, 4) Soil Amendments, and 5) Worker Practices and Field Observations. The areas of "Environmental Assessments" and "Field Observation" encompass the evaluation of animal (wildlife) activity in crop fields. It should be noted that the list of potential animals that serve as carriers of *E. coli* O157 specifically did not include rodents or birds. Thus, the current increase in the use of rodent bait stations in and around fields is being driven more by the marketplace: buyers, and therefore growers, are endeavoring to prevent the presence of "foreign objects" (i.e., rodents) in packaged fresh produce.

Growers seeking to become Certified Members of the LGMA must successfully pass pre-season and pre-harvest audits. The pre-harvest audits are to occur within 7 days of harvest, and daily field assessments occur during harvest. A main focus of these audits is whether wildlife or other animals are present, or have recently been present, in the crop fields.

It is the desire of growers that the development of these standards and compliance requirements will permit growers to comply with food safety requirements in a fair and predictable manner, thus reducing economic risk to growers, who presently may not be able to predict or anticipate a specific buyer's requirements to reduce perceived risk of contamination to fresh produce. By working together as an industry, we can continue to reduce conflicts and resolve these critical issues in this major segment of California's agricultural industry.

LITERATURE CITED

BERETTI, M., and D. STUART. 2008. Food safety and environmental quality impose conflicting demands on Central Coast growers. *Calif. Agric.* 62(2):68-73.