

Farms may cut habitat renewal over E. coli fears

Glen Martin, Chronicle Environment Writer

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The recent scares over deadly bacteria in California produce may hurt farm programs aimed at restoring wildlife habitat and cutting water pollution.

Such environmental programs could be at odds with "clean farming techniques" promoted by food processors. Those techniques encourage growers to remove grassy areas that are planted to reduce erosion and trap pesticides before they reach waterways. The practices also discourage habitat zones that might attract animals that carry bacteria like E. coli or salmonella.

Some farmers say they must opt out of wildlife habitat and water-quality programs: If they don't follow processor guidelines, they won't be able to sell their crops.

"The processors have been putting some pressure on growers for the past couple of years over vegetated corridors because of worries that they may be sources of animal contamination," said John Anderson, a Yolo County farmer who grows native grass seed for use in restoration projects.

"But then the E. coli thing happened, and they went from concerned to panic," he said.

Right now, the trend mainly has implications for produce growers in Central California -- where E. coli is the worry -- and for the almond industry in the Central Valley, where concerns over salmonella contamination are high.

E. coli-tainted spinach from Central California was blamed for killing three people and sickening about 200 others in late August and September. Most recently, about 70 people became ill with the bacteria after eating at East Coast Taco Bell restaurants.

Animal feces can contain the bacteria, which is difficult to wash off produce.

A Salinas Valley grower who requested anonymity because of contract negotiations with processors called the current situation "extremely touchy, with the people who put their names on produce bags having the most to lose. One association with a pathogen and they can lose their brand."

The grower said that even if processors allow some wildlife habitat near cropland, they now require farmers to put out large quantities of poisoned bait to kill rodents.

"When we plant hedgerows now, we have to use the bait stations or we lose our contracts," he said. "Later, you see birds of prey perched over the bait. They eat mice sluggish from the poison and get poisoned themselves. It kind of defeats the whole purpose of putting in the habitat."

Trevor Suslow, an agricultural extension research specialist with UC Davis, said food-safety field audits also can have a chilling effect on habitat programs.

A processor representative "will come out and look at a field and possibly give a certain (area) a negative score because environmental projects such as wetlands or filter strips were nearby," Suslow said. "So the message is, if you want to sell to Company X, you'll take out the projects."

Natural Selection Foods, which markets Earthbound Farm produce and other brands, sold tainted spinach involved in the September E. coli cases. Spokeswoman Samantha Cabaluna said the company is re-evaluating all production guidelines.

"One thing we are implementing is a program that will test every truckload of produce that comes in," Cabaluna said. "That way, if we find a problem, we'll be able to isolate it. That might allow us to preserve wildlife habitat because we could identify specific trouble spots rather than applying a blanket solution."

But Anderson said the emphasis on "clean farming" is increasing throughout the state, especially in the almond-growing regions of the Central Valley. The Almond Board of California promotes farming techniques that encourage clean, bare earth in and around almond orchards.

A pamphlet on "good agricultural practices" from the Almond Board is specific about contamination concerns: "All animals, wild and domestic, including mammals, birds, reptiles and insects, are potential sources of contamination. ... It is important to minimize attraction, harborage and potential for contamination."

Anderson said a farmer reading those words comes away with one message: Rip out anything that can attract wild creatures.

Merle Jacobs, an associate director with the Almond Board, said his organization's advisories are suggestions, not directives.

"We are not saying 'Thou shalt not,' " Jacobs said. "But there is a certain level of risk with a hedgerow. We know animals increase the risk of contamination. We're just saying if you decide to have hedgerows, you may have to adjust to the additional risk, such as putting out more bait."

Suslow said it's unclear whether the threat is real.

"But in the absence of data, I'm inclined to think the benefits of restoration outweigh risk from additional contamination sources," he said.

Fields are never sterile -- even clean-farmed cropland can support abundant populations of wild animals, Suslow said.

"Even if you do nothing in terms of habitat, the potential for contamination remains," he said.

Preliminary research indicates concerns about wildlife as vectors for pathogens may be misdirected. An analysis from UC Santa Cruz concludes that the strain of bacterium associated with the recent spinach poisonings - E. coli 0157:H7 -- is rare in wild birds and mammals, and resides most abundantly in the digestive tracts of grain-fed cattle.

Farmers shouldn't be cast as villains in the dispute, said Kay Mercer, a coordinator with the Agricultural Watershed Coalition.

"If the marketplace demands food with a risk tolerance of zero, it's going to be very hard for farmers to maintain wildlife programs," she said.

But some experts think habitat programs will weather the current controversy. Water-quality regulations require growers to minimize field runoff, and vegetative strips remain the most effective means of control. Also, many farmers are philosophically committed to their habitat programs.

"It's true that growers are scared, and there is increased scrutiny from processors," said Sam Earnshaw, a Salinas Valley program coordinator with the Community Alliance With Family Farmers, a group that helps growers establish hedgerows.

"We don't know how this emphasis on 'good agricultural practices' will pan out," he said. "But I do know I'm still busy. I have 40 hedgerow projects scheduled over the next two years."

E-mail Glen Martin at glenmartin@sfchronicle.com.

