



CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF
FOOD & AGRICULTURE

Karen Ross, Secretary

April 6, 2021

Dear California Industry Partner,

California agriculture has a leading position in the world thanks to California farming and ranching families helping to feed a growing global population. The diversity of agricultural activities that we know today has been a part of California's legacy and landscape for many years. As we all work together to address the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, we're finding ourselves devoting a great deal of time to matters of food safety in the wake of recurring outbreaks of *E. coli* O157:H7 in leafy greens. Therefore, I am writing with a friendly invitation to participate in the California Longitudinal Study (CALs), so we can all learn about this trend. For more information about CALs or to schedule an initial meeting, please contact Dr. Michele Jay-Russell at UC Davis, mjay@ucdavis.edu, to learn more.

The CALs research project is in collaboration with the University of California, Davis, Western Center for Food Safety (WCFS) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (CFSAN). With each *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak, more is learned about potential contributing factors on produce farms and the broader agricultural environment. However, we still don't understand exactly how these outbreaks occur or how pathogens are moving in the environment. Knowledge gaps remain and it is essential to collaborate with our academic research partners to learn more.

We are in changing times. The implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) was one major change felt across many sectors of the food industry. We are just now starting to see and fully realize the far-reaching effects of FSMA among our interconnected agriculture systems. The FDA's [New Era of Smarter Food Safety](#) program is another change through which we are becoming more data-driven to foster an industry-wide culture of food safety.

Between 2009 and 2018, FDA and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified 40 foodborne outbreaks of Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* (STEC) infections in the United States with a confirmed or suspected link to leafy greens. Recent outbreaks linked to romaine lettuce or leafy greens have continued to occur since 2018 and the investigative findings are detailed in FDA reports [online](#). It's worth noting that the outbreaks we have faced in recent years are of a distinct, recurring *E. coli* strain. STEC infections in humans cause serious, sometimes life-threatening, illness. These outbreaks – and the actions aimed at preventing them – have significant personal and economic implications for growers, ranchers, processors, retailers, and especially consumers who have been made ill and their families.



Food safety is a shared responsibility. I appreciate those who have been leaders for their industry – early adopters who have come forward and are working to find solutions to a recurring problem by collaborating with the nation’s best scientists. It shows a commitment to food safety and California agriculture. However, greater participation is needed and therefore I request your engagement so we can move swiftly, with intention, to help ensure California’s essential food safety standards are known, implemented, and met.

Reducing risk of pathogen contamination in the agricultural environment is complex with no one solution, but several measures when combined in what is known as a hurdle approach will likely yield effective results. FDA’s [Leafy Greens STEC Action Plan](#) outlines a number of progressive food safety initiatives underway and California is working with FDA on several efforts within this action plan to address knowledge gaps, engage in prevention measures, and conduct response activities (learn more about the [California Initiatives here](#)). The results of much of the research being undertaken will not be available right away which makes increased participation in the CALS especially important.

We take great pride in the quality, diversity and safety of the bounty produced in California while meeting the highest standards for worker protection and environmental stewardship. Our commitment to food safety – preventing foodborne illnesses and deaths – reminds us we are all in this together. I respectfully ask that you engage in the CALS project in a way that works for you and your operation.

Thank you for your help,



Karen Ross
Secretary

cc: Frank Yiannas, Deputy Commissioner, Food Policy & Response, U.S. Food and Drug Administration

