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BARRY ESTABROOK

# POLITICS OF THE PLATE: GREENS OF WRATH

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We all want safe spinach. But the measures now being adopted may destroy the land without solving the problem.



All that now remains of a windbreak in California's Salinas County.

In the morning of August 14, 2006, a truck set out from Paicines Ranch—a bucolic place in California's San Benito Valley, all dun-colored pastures, twisting rivers, and green thickets—with a load of baby spinach. What no one knew was that the greens were contaminated with E. coli O157:H7. An hour or so later, the truck backed up to a processing plant owned by Natural Selection Foods, known for its Earthbound Farm organic products. The spinach was washed, mixed with leaves from three other farms, and packed into six-ounce bags. Fewer than 48 hours after being picked, 15,660 pounds of spinach were distributed across the country. In the weeks that followed, the spinach left at least 205 consumers in 26 states and one Canadian province sickened. Of those, 103 had to go to the hospital, where 31 were treated for a condition that put them at risk for acute kidney failure. Twenty-eight recovered, but three were not so lucky. Two elderly women, one from Wisconsin and one from Nebraska, and a two-year-old boy from Idaho died.

Scientists were unsure—and still are to this day—how the spinach became contaminated. Despite this, however, the huge industry that is built on fresh-cut, bagged greens reacted with unprecedented speed. Within a month, 60 packers agreed to draw up a list of preventive measures. Five months later, the new coalition, which sells more than 99 percent of the Golden State's leafy greens, formally released the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement, a 54-page set of rules. While some of the hastily implemented regulations were based on scientifically valid research, other standards were simply borrowed from those applied to other crops or arrived at through consensus. The agreement covers every aspect of farming. Many of its strictures are quite sensible (workers with diarrhea can't handle fresh produce). Others introduce new layers of governmental oversight (four unannounced visits by inspectors each year).

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Sometimes the rules can seem contradictory. Cattle, known to be a primary source of E. coli, can graze within 30 feet of crops, but a compost pile containing cow manure must be 400 feet away. Often, guidelines are couched in vague language: Farmers should “consider” fencing and other measures that might reduce intrusions of wild animals that may carry pathogens. Seasonal lakes and ponds may attract wild animals and “should be considered as part of any land use evaluation.”

But good intentions have gone badly awry. In the name of food safety, farmers have reshaped the landscape in ways that, according to critics, have reversed two decades’ worth of environmental conservation. If the new policies are adopted by the federal government—and some say that it is only a matter of time—they will have profound ramifications for small, sustainable growers in postage-stamp fields thousands of miles from California. And there is scant evidence that the standards have actually addressed the real problem.

Until the outbreak, bagged greens were one of the marvels of industrialized agriculture, available in every grocery store from Anchorage to Miami, 365 days a year. A harried parent with a toddler in tow or a single person sitting down to a quick meal could grab a bag of salad fixings and dump them in a bowl. No need to cut or clean. Almost unknown 20 years ago, precut greens have tripled their market share in the past decade and now account for 67 percent of all sales of fresh-cut vegetables.

At least some of this phenomenal growth is due to Earthbound Farm. In 1996, the company, which operates in the heart of California, adopted a new technology—“breathable” plastic bags that permit greens to take in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide without losing moisture, thus allowing them to remain “fresh” for 17 days. The original two-and-a-half-acre garden has grown to more than 40,000 acres, some owned by Earthbound, others by farmers who sell to the company. Earthbound’s rising-sun logo can now be found in 80 percent of the grocery stores in the United States and Canada, and its facility in San Juan Bautista can pack and ship 700,000 containers a day—more than 2.5 million pounds per week.

To step into an Earthbound Farm spinach field is to be overwhelmed by the incomprehensible vastness of it all. It looks identical to hundreds of operations that stretch across the valley floor, stopping only at the base of the faraway, hazy mountains. An area big enough to accommodate a dozen football fields is carpeted with symmetrical strips of tiny, perfect baby spinach plants with just enough space between the rows to allow for the passage of a mechanical harvester. A dozen Latino laborers wearing aprons, rubber gloves, and hairnets tend the mechanical beast as it creeps along. Two workers scramble in front of it, removing any damaged plants. Ahead of a ten-foot-wide band-saw blade, a series of wires called “ticklers” protrude down to rustle leaves and rouse any snoozing insects, which are whisked away by fans. The blade, inches off the ground, sends a green river of spinach up a conveyor belt and over an air gap that eliminates sticks, clumps of dirt, and heavy objects. The greens flow through a trough filled with chlorinated water and spew into white plastic containers. Moving as fast as they can, the field hands stack one crate after another on a trailer behind the harvester. In less than 90 minutes, the crew and the contraption pick 6,000 pounds of spinach, which is immediately loaded into a refrigerated truck beside the field.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT ANGER

keywords politics of the plate, best of gourmet, food policy, agriculture, barry estabrook

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Once full, the truck trundles to Earthbound's San Juan Bautista plant, where bacterial contamination clearly has been declared public enemy number one. When I visit, I am asked to remove my watch and jewelry. After slipping on a hairnet, I slosh through a shoe bath of disinfectant with my hands held over little troughs equipped with miniature showerheads. Inside, I shiver in the 36-degree breeze. Workers in lab coats and white caps pluck samples from pallets with tweezers to test them for pathogens. The greens are warehoused for 12 hours until they receive a clean bill of health. Only then are they released into the processing area to be washed in a chlorine and citric-acid bath and dried in what look like giant salad spinners. Automatically measured into plastic bags or "clamshells," the greens are tested a second time. If they pass muster again, they are loaded into refrigerated trucks for journeys of one to five days, depending on their destination.

In the two years following the outbreak, Earthbound's inspectors caught 90 contaminated loads of greens at the first test stage. They intercepted another two at the secondary inspection. And there have been no further E. coli outbreaks caused by greens. Earthbound's solution—concentrate on conditions inside the packing plant and abide by the marketing agreement in its fields—seems to be working. But other producers have adopted a more extreme view of the new regulations and initiated what amounts to a scorched-earth policy. In the name of food safety, they have scraped 30-foot-wide borders of bare dirt around the edges of fields, set up poison-bait stations for ground squirrels and mice, installed eight-foot-high fences to exclude deer and other wildlife, ripped vegetation from creeks and ditches, and drained ponds and lakes or treated them with chemicals that kill every living thing in them. Creeks flowing into the Salinas River run brown with silty water polluted with fertilizer and pesticides. Piles of bleached, bonelike tree trunks and roots have replaced wooded groves.

Noting that Earthbound has achieved its success without resorting to such devastating measures, or anything close to them, Will Daniels, the company's vice president of quality, food safety, and organic integrity, is of the opinion that some growers are overreacting. "Removal of wildlife habitat runs counter to the tenets of organic farming," he says.

Unfortunately, despite its size, Earthbound is a small player in the \$2.6 billion fresh-cut salad business, accounting for less than 5 percent of total sales. A survey released by the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County showed that 89 percent of the Central Coast growers responding to the survey had taken at least one measure to discourage or eliminate wildlife from their cropped areas.

Some concerned Californians are trying to stop the rampant destruction. Foremost among them is Jo Ann Baumgartner, the head of a conservation group called the Wild Farm Alliance. I first met her one morning last May, at the Watsonville Airport. With long, straight, gray-blond hair, Baumgartner still looks a bit like the hippie farmer she once was. But there's nothing laid-back about her campaign to preserve the Salinas Valley and its environs. A few weeks earlier, while driving along a freeway, Baumgartner had seen a bulldozer working near a small lake ten miles south of Salinas. Concerned, she asked pilot Saul Chaikin (of Lighthawk, a volunteer environmental aviation organization) to fly down with me and snap a few aerial pictures.

From the air, the Salinas Valley, divided into perfect rectangles of brown and green, looks as though it has been laid out by a geometrician. In the aerial photographs Baumgartner had given us before our flight, the lake was bordered by an unmistakable claw-shaped fringe of trees. It should have stood out as a rare insult to uniformity. But on the first pass, we couldn't find it. Chaikin banked and dropped a little lower. Then we saw it: a dark brown pattern against the sand-colored earth of a newly plowed field. The





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lake—a refuge for waterfowl, deer, squirrels, and, possibly, threatened California red-legged frogs; a sight so rare and aesthetically striking that local artists set up their easels on the freeway’s edge—was gone. Plowed under.

Early the next morning, Baumgartner called to say that she had persuaded a farmer who insisted on anonymity to talk to me about the pressure he was getting from packers. I met Baumgartner in a Denny’s parking lot on the outskirts of Salinas, and we drove south along secondary roads. The circuitous journey ensured that I could never retrace the route.

“I’m afraid of retaliation from the large buyers that I have to sell to,” said the farmer, a forty-something dark-haired man, looking at me nervously. “There are plenty of growers who are ready and willing to clear away everything.” He nodded toward a neighbor’s field, where an earthen ditch had eroded away one side of an access road. “Buyers don’t come right out and order you to do this or that. It’s more subtle: ‘We can’t buy crops that are grown within so many feet of that weedy waterway.’ And because the handler sells to a number of retailers, you have to conform to the strictest common denominator.”

So far, this farmer, who works several hundred acres, has resisted. His drainage ditches are full of native plants. “One auditor suggested I spray them with herbicides—and he was an organic auditor.” He pointed to a hip-high, black rubber fence between his field and a ditch. “They call it a food safety barrier. I call it a frog fence. Frogs don’t carry E. coli.” Even with the barrier, his buyer refused to take greens grown within 50 feet of the vegetated areas, so a border of perfectly good spinach was left standing. “The idea of the organic farming movement is to farm in harmony with nature. If that’s not happening, then the consumers are being misled,” he said.

keywords politics of the plate, best of gourmet, food policy, agriculture, barry estabrook

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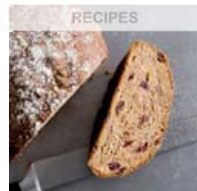
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Baumgartner and I drove south for 20 minutes to a grill in King City for lunch with Bob Martin, general manager of Rio Farms, a 6,000-acre operation. There is nothing reticent about Martin, a strapping, crew-cut man. "I'm so outspoken that I've come close to losing my job," he said. Rio Farms has spent \$500,000 to comply with buyers' food-safety demands, which Martin dismisses as "window dressing." He has ripped out riverbank wildlife habitats and erected ten miles of eight-foot-tall fencing to keep deer off his company's land. "There's not a scrap of scientific research that shows deer carry E. coli in California," he said. "Where will they draw the line? Birds? Bugs?"

Hoping that hard scientific proof will allow him to tear down that fence, Martin has been working in cooperation with Dr. Andy Gordus, a staff scientist with the California Department of Fish and Game. Last fall, Gordus examined the colons of 27 deer shot by hunters in Monterey County. All tested negative for E. coli. He plans to examine more deer this autumn and the next. "The science isn't there to prove that deer are a factor, but farmers are being required to moonscape the habitat around their fields in the name of food safety," he says. "That's amputating a person's leg because they have a hangnail."

One evening, just around dinnertime, I visited Phil Foster, who operates a 250-acre organic farm based in San Juan Bautista. Beginning a decade ago, Foster built his own local distribution network to wean himself off selling to the processors. It's a decision for which he is grateful, he said, as he and his pack of four assorted mongrels set out to walk me through fields containing more than 20 crops: apples, cherries, chard, fennel, bell peppers, peas, strawberries, walnuts, broccoli. He is proud of the hedge of wild buckwheat, lilac, coyote brush, and elderberry he planted along the edge of his fields. Far from being a "food-safety issue," the hedge of native plants provides a vital habitat for birds and beneficial insects that feed on bugs that would otherwise devour his crops. I poked my head through the hedge. A 25-foot moat of cracked, barren earth stood between Foster's land and his neighbor's uniform rows of greens.

Dinner, which was prepared by Foster's wife, Katherine, began with zucchini blossoms, lightly battered and stuffed with feta, parmesan, and provolone. They were followed by a salad of mixed greens topped with walnuts and slivers of golden beet and a bowl of simple sautéed snap peas. Then came pasta with a sauce of oven-dried tomatoes and Swiss chard, and fresh strawberries for dessert. Everything except the cheese and the pasta was grown on Foster's farm. Asked what he would do if the regulations became mandatory, Foster sipped his wine and said, "This is a good way to farm. I would fight for as long as I could."

He has an ally in Judith Redmond, the co-owner of Full Belly Farm, northwest of Sacramento, and also the president of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF). Ever since the one-size-fits-all rules were first unveiled, she has feared they would become mandatory for all greens growers. "The people who are going to have the most difficult time are those who have small, diverse farms that produce multiple crops for the local market," Redmond said. Such growers can't pay auditors to inspect their fields for compliance. They lack the staff to record every instance of a wild animal setting foot on their property, and if one does, they can't afford to hire a trained expert to assess the problem. Nor do they have time to maintain the long, involved paper trails that the big buyers demand. "I'm not sure raising the bar so high makes sense," she said, "particularly if you're raising it in the wrong place. A lot of small farms would go out of business."

Redmond and the CAFF have made some big enemies by pointing out one indisputable fact that the big packers would rather ignore: Of the 12 recorded E. coli outbreaks attributed to California leafy greens





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since 1999, 10 have been traced to mechanically harvested greens bagged in large production facilities. The source of two outbreaks has yet to be determined. None have been linked to small farms selling to local markets.

“There is a clear difference between farms that machine-harvest three hundred acres of one crop in a single day and ship to a processing plant that produces bags of greens that can last sixteen days on the grocery store shelf, and farms with thirty acres and thirty different crops that are hand-harvested and sold at a farmers market or a CSA a day, or at most two, later,” Redmond says. “It’s the industrial food system that created this problem. We didn’t.”

The corporate processors vehemently dispute that assertion, saying that pathogens do not discriminate between small plots and monocrop acreages. But after all the efforts in the fields and in the processing facilities, no one knows what really caused the outbreak at Paicines, and there is no hard evidence that the draconian measures have fixed it, despite the optimistic observation that “it hasn’t happened again.”

Charles Benbrook, the chief scientist at The Organic Center, in Boulder, Colorado, which supports research into the benefits of organic food and farming, thinks he knows what went wrong in the Paicines field. The culprit, he claims, was most likely E. coli-laden dust that blew over the spinach from a cow pasture. Exposed to 100-degree heat and daily irrigation from sprinklers, the dust hardened to create a ceramic-like biofilm on leaf surfaces that was impervious to the washing processes in the packing plant. Once chilled and bagged, the E. coli went dormant and stayed that way as long as the temperature inside the bag remained low. So maybe a shipment sat outside too long on a loading dock. Maybe a store’s produce display was too warm. A shopper may have left the spinach in the back of the car for a couple of hours while running errands. Somehow, the bags warmed and became perfect little incubators for E. coli 0157:H7. According to this scenario, the outbreak had nothing to do with deer, ground squirrels, or frogs. “E. coli 0157 bacteria shed into the environment in the United States all originate from the back end of a cow,” he says. “Requiring growers to take out grass in waterways and trees and shrubs along the edge of their fields could, in the final analysis, prove counterproductive. If areas around fields were covered with grass and shrubs, there wouldn’t be any dust in the first place.”

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Cows and greens have coexisted in agricultural areas since day one, but industrial agriculture and the modern plastics industry have put them together with consequences no one could have foreseen. A food-poisoning tragedy has led to an environmental disaster. And if Benbrook is correct, somewhere in California's fields or processing plants, waiting for the right conditions, is another potentially fatal outbreak of E. coli 0157:H7.

## SALAD SPEAK

Like many other subspecialties, the world of mass-produced greens has its own rather bizarre language. Here are some key terms. **Biosolids:** human fecal material in sewerage sludge. **Clean:** refers to a field surrounded by bare dirt. **Food safety barrier:** a low fence designed to keep small mammals and reptiles out of fields (also known as a frog fence). **Foreign object complaints:** consumer complaints about twigs, stones, insects, weeds, bits of metal—anything that is not supposed to be in their bags of salad. **Four-legged food safety concern:** a farm dog. **Harborage:** native vegetation that provides habitat for small mammals, reptiles, and beneficial insects. **Kill step:** cooking. **Nonsynthetic crop treatments:** manure. **Product degradation:** rot. **Reentry interval:** time that must elapse between when a crop is sprayed with a pesticide and when farm laborers can safely return to work.

## THINK OUTSIDE THE BAG

- Cooking is the only way to kill bacteria in greens for certain, but there are some less drastic steps you can take to protect yourself.
- You've heard it a thousand times: Buy local; buy small. Packaged produce in the supermarket can be more than two weeks old. Produce from a CSA or farmers market packed in ordinary, unsealed plastic bags is most likely picked a day or two before you buy it.
- Buy whole heads or bunches of intact plants; precut edges provide a particularly easy point of entry for bacteria.
- Washing won't get all the bugs out of contaminated bagged greens, but it can remove some surface bacteria.

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- If you do buy prewashed, factory-bagged produce, look at the “use before” date. If it’s getting close, avoid the product. The longer it has been in the bag, the more opportunities for pathogens to grow.
- Never, ever eat uncooked greens from bags whose expiration date has passed, no matter how fresh they appear.

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