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STOP Foodborne Illness Group Visits California Leafy Greens Farms

June 13, 2013 -- Last week a group of consumers who have been sickened in past foodborne illness outbreaks involving leafy greens traveled from across the country to visit California farmers who grow products like those which made them sick. While the two groups might initially appear to be adversaries, the purpose of the visit was to determine where they might share common ground.



“While our two groups may appear to be at odds, the fact is -- both of us are focused on the common goal of ensuring people don’t get sick from eating healthy products like leafy greens,” said Deirdre Schlunegger, CEO of STOP Foodborne Illness, a non-profit organization, which represents victims of foodborne illness. “To my knowledge this is the first time a commodity group has proactively reached out to us and invited consumers impacted by foodborne illness to come visit their operations and learn about what they are doing to protect people from getting sick. We very much appreciate the invitation from the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement. I think we all learned a great deal.”

During their visit, the group from STOP visited farms and processing facilities located in leafy greens-producing areas near San Luis Obispo and Santa Maria, California. They met with farmers, handlers, processors and food safety experts; visited leafy greens farms; watched leafy greens being harvested and packaged and had numerous meetings with industry members to learn about the production of leafy greens and hear about the food safety practices currently in place. The group also saw a demonstration of the mandatory government audit which is at the heart of the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement (LGMA). The LGMA has been in place since 2007 to verify through government audit that a set of science-based food safety practices are being followed on leafy greens farms.

“We wanted this group to see the systems in place for California leafy greens that help to prevent people from becoming sick,” said Scott Horsfall, CEO of the LGMA. “But we also really wanted to hear their stories and to learn about the concerns of people who have been impacted by foodborne illness.”

Ryan Talley, chairman of the LGMA and a producer of leafy greens expressed his appreciation to STOP and its members. “We know it’s very difficult for these individuals to recount stories of how they became ill and the tragic impacts of foodborne illness they have personally experienced,” said Talley. “I



asked these remarkable people to please continue to talk about their experiences and relay them to farmers like us, because we need to hear it. Together, farmers and consumers can make a difference in making food safer.”

Lauren Bush, who was sickened in the 2006 E. coli outbreak linked to spinach and participated in last week’s visit to leafy green farmers, lives in New York and is now an advocate for food safety. “California is ground zero. It is where the 2006 spinach outbreak happened that affected me so much. I wasn’t sure what I could say to these farmers that would really resonate with them. Not because they don’t care, but because they had heard it before,” said Bush.

“I was really touched that not only did the farmers we met this past week really listen to our stories, but I truly could feel the impact,” Bush continued. “I met their kids and shook their hands. I saw where they work every day. I think they truly mean it when they say they will carry our faces and voices with them. After what I saw this week, I can definitely tell other consumers that steps are being taken by California leafy greens farmers to protect others from getting sick.”

As a result of this visit, both STOP and the LGMA expressed a strong desire to seek ways to work together to advance the cause of preventing foodborne illness. “We are very interested in working together to find a way to help communicate all we learned from each other during this brief visit,” said the LGMA CEO Horsfall. “This visit was one of the most impactful activities I have participated with since joining LGMA. We are very thankful to STOP and its members for making this important event happen.”

ST To hear impressions from individuals who participated on the tour, please visit: <http://youtu.be/91jiPo37xf8>. To Read a blog post about this tour written by Ryan Talley, LGMA Chairman, click here: <http://lgma.ca.gov/blog/faces-behind-statistics>

OP Foodborne Illness is a national nonprofit public health organization dedicated to the prevention of illness and death from foodborne illness by advocating for sound public policy, building public awareness, and assisting those impacted by foodborne illness. For more information visit www.stopfoodborneillness.org.

In 2007, California farmers came together to raise the bar for food safety. As a result the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement (LGMA) was formed. Members of the LGMA are working collaboratively to protect public health by reducing potential sources of contamination in California-grown leafy greens. See more at www.lgma.ca.gov.

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Note to reporters: Several of the individuals who participated on this tour from both STOP and the LGMA are available to make additional comments. Please contact us if you are interested in speaking with them directly.

Photo Captions:

Photo #1. Stanley Rutledge and Vanessa Coffman of STOP Foodborne Illness take a closer look at a head of napa cabbage held by Brycen Ikeda of Ikeda Farms, Oceano CA as Emily Grabowski, who was sickened in a past leafy greens outbreak, and April Ward of the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement look on.

Photo #2. Members of STOP Foodborne Illness, including individuals sickened in outbreaks associated with leafy greens, pose for a photo along with government auditors and California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement staff and members during a tour of a leafy greens farm in Oceano, CA.