

## E.Coli and food processing

Written by John Eager

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The Ledbury Portal asked Caroline Handley of Handley Organics about the recent E.Coli outbreak in Germany. Her response reveals why local food production is important in the supply of uncontaminated food, while criticising the role played by processed foods.

Caroline's response in full:

"If you walk around the modern food emporiums you should be horrified by some of the food processing that many people now take for granted. With salad bags, to a certain extent a disaster waiting to happen. There are too many unknowns in the equation of how it has been washed and processed, packaged and transported and whether or not the cold chain has been broken.

"On display as a chilled product the salad bags are easy to pick, (we pick every day and we do not pretend to wash), but then, they are put in the shopping basket, carried around the store and once paid for, they are often in warm cars and submitted to the drive home. By the time they get to the domestic fridge they could be several days old and reached several temperatures."

"The E.coli outbreak in Germany with over 22 real people dead and still over 2,000 people ill, many of those in a serious condition, the culprit was originally thought to be a salad crop. This is a new strain of E.coli not previously seen by the world health organisation on salad crops. A mutant strain with very aggressive and often fatal consequences, they struggle to find the cause and prevent further fatalities.

"As the news broke, "dirty organic produce" was deemed to be the most likely source and prompted by the myth that organic producers use raw manures to grow plants, this was the journalists' logical answer when looking for a cause.

"Then the German authorities pointed the finger at Spanish salad produce and a 20,000 ton per

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week export industry, worth over 200 million euros, ground to a halt with over 70,000 jobs at risk. A few days later the same authorities said that it was unlikely that Spanish produce was to blame as no Spanish cases had been confirmed and they then transferred their investigations to an area 62 miles south of Hamburg in northern Germany.

"This finger of suspicion is still as I understand pointed at a German bean sprout nursery. But as more details are revealed, there is still a lot of scientific investigation to be done as E.coli is associated with human/animal manures and how this got into the fresh vegetable produce is still a mystery. Studies show this can take a minimum of three months from start of culture .

"If this episode should teach us anything, it is surely that our food systems are vulnerable to attack. There has been talk of terrorism, but the culprit must be a mutant bacterium that has more likely been borne due by the way we transport and process our food.

"All I know is that at the start of the UK salad season, the last thing that growers need is several countries advising their citizens not to eat raw salad crops.

"As this sorry tale continues to unfold, it seems that if we ever needed a reason to convince people that fresh, local, unprocessed produce is best, then this episode provides us with all the evidence we need. Also people have to be reminded that preparation of a meal can take time, even if it is to wash the salad. Too many people don't and won't take time to prepare a meal, hence the ready-made market is the largest growing market in the food industry."

[EHEC – A problem not specific to organic farming. FiBL](#) [The Swiss Research Institute of Organic Agriculture's summary of scientific facts]