

Spinach wholesaler feels pain in wallet

Lansing farm dumps 5 tons of vegetable

By Emma Graves
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Tribune staff reporter

Gone are 10,000 pounds of spinach that might have reached Chicago restaurants and grocery stores.

Gone is \$30,000 in sales for a local distributor.

De Jong Brothers Farms, the major source of fresh-bagged spinach in Chicago, has been pitching its produce into Dumpsters, just like everyone else. After more than 100 people across the country have fallen ill from eating spinach contaminated with *E. coli* bacteria, the company is hiring a lab to test the produce it shipped in from Colorado.

And De Jong Brothers, a family-owned farm, has guarded hopes that its own crop of fresh spinach still in the field will test clean—and that customers will want to buy it.

"I think we have a good, healthy product. But at this point, we have to be careful," said Matthew De Jong, vice president and owner of the company, who pulled the leafy greens from shelves and deliv-

SPINACH:

Firms fear

consumer will

go elsewhere

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

ery trucks this week.

As a growing spinach-borne *E. coli* scare spreads around the country, it has forced distributors like De Jong to shut down their farms and retrieve produce from buyers, carrying the burden of the costs.

"It's all voluntary at this point if a grower decides not to distribute it," said Scott MacIntire, Food and Beverage Administration Chicago district director, who said consumer confidence "is at one of its lower points for fresh spinach and leafy greens."

That puts the pinch on operations like De Jong's, which buys spinach from other states in the summer and winter and grows its own the rest of the year. "The current local crop is growing with the hope of making its way to shelves and salads next month, once consumers begin to trust spinach again."

"I feel fairly confident that ours is free" of contaminants, De Jong said Tuesday, as he looked for a Chicago laboratory that would do a Food and Drug Administration-approved test of his produce.

Almost overnight, the market for spinach has evaporated amid a national health scare, leaving growers nervous as the fall harvest begins.

The bacteria have killed one person and sickened more than 100 others in 21 states. The Food and Drug Administration warned consumers not to eat fresh spinach, prompting grocery stores from Maine to California to pull it from their shelves.

Some officials said the real

E. coli outbreak appears double normal severity

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Federal health officials are investigating whether a more potent strain of *E. coli* is behind an outbreak linked to fresh spinach that has sickened at least 131 people, half of whom have been hospitalized.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Tuesday that 50 percent of those reported sick in the outbreak were hospitalized. That's double the 25 percent to 30 percent seen in other *E. coli* outbreaks, said Dr. David Acheson of the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

"We're running higher than that," Acheson told reporters in a conference call. "One possibility is this is a virulent strain."

Also unexpected was the 15

fallout from the tainted spinach won't be felt by grocers and distributors, but by the farmers and the produce companies that buy their spinach.

"The growers, the producers are most interested in finding the answers to these outbreaks," said Rep. Sam Farr (D-Calif.), whose district includes the Salinas Valley, which has been implicated in the current contamination. "These outbreaks can bankrupt these companies."

In south suburban Lansing, the fallout looks like the four Dumpsters behind the De Jong Brothers farmhouse office, filled to overflowing Tuesday with 8,000 bags of spinach, still looking crisp and perky.

Beyond the Dumpsters, in 20 acres under cultivation bounded by encroaching suburbs, the first inch of the next crop is

percent of food poisoning victims who developed a type of kidney failure called hemolytic-uremic syndrome. Five percent is more typical, Acheson said.

He cautioned that the numbers could be skewed by underreporting of less severe cases of illness. "It's too early to say at this point," he added.

Reports of illness continued to trickle into the CDC—the tally was up from Monday's 114 sickened, though the death toll remained at one, a 77-year-old woman from Wisconsin. Officials said that the cases appeared to have occurred earlier but were only now being reported. No one appears to have fallen ill since Sept. 5, according to the CDC.

The FDA continued to warn people not to eat raw spinach.

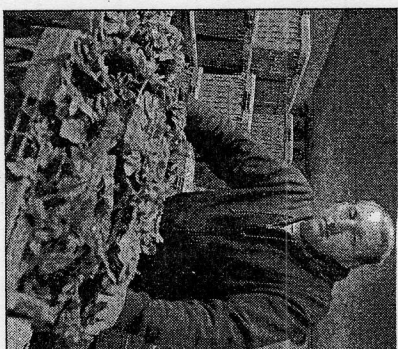
peeking up from the crumbling brown earth.

At 26, De Jong is the third generation to run the family business started in 1962. On Tuesday, his mood was somber and frustrated. "I love doing this, but this really puts a damper on the joy of farming," he said.

De Jong Brothers is a small business, with 25 employees. The office walls hold framed Bible verses and photos of family reunions.

The company distributes packaged spinach in competition with national companies like Dole Foods, and, said De Jong, "Now we have to deal with this."

Spinach, he pointed out, is a capricious crop. In addition to fierce competition with deep pockets, he must deal with the extremes of northern Illinois weather.



Tribune photo by John Smierciak
Matthew De Jong, vice president of De Jong Brothers Farms of Lansing.

The spinach he distributes in the fall is grown during the summer in Colorado. In the winter, it is grown in Texas and Arizona. Chicago spinach can grow only in the fall and spring. The next crop is due for harvest in October.

He's thrown out 8,000 of those bags each day since Monday, he said, decrying a "panic" he has to accept "to maintain good relations with my customers."

But at least one customer trusted the farm Tuesday.

A neighbor clattered up to the Dumpsters in an old pickup, then set about throwing a dozen bags in the back of his truck.

"I have no fear," said next-door neighbor and retired farmer Herman Zeidenrust, 87. "If there's one bad apple in a bushel, it doesn't make everybody bad."

Tribune wire services contributed to this report.
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