

NATION

Tainted spinach found in package

Probe zeroes in on
3 California counties

By Andrew Bridges

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Spinach found in the refrigerator of a person made ill by *E. coli* was contaminated with the bacteria, health officials said Wednesday.

Federal and state investigators looking for the origin of the deadly outbreak focused on nine farms in California's Salinas Valley, said Dr. Mark Horton, the state public health officer. They also were checking processing plants, said Horton, who called the bag of tainted Dole baby spinach the "smoking gun" in the case.

Despite closing in on the source of the bacteria as likely somewhere in Monterey, San Benito or Santa Clara Counties, officials still urge consumers not to eat fresh spinach.

"Yesterday we had it down to California. Today we've got it down to three counties," Dr. David Acheson of the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition said Wednesday. "We want it down to a salad bowl and eventually a spinach leaf."

The tainted bag came from a refrigerator in New Mexico, said health officials for that



Los Angeles Times photo by Al Seib

Michael Dobler, a third-generation farmer near California's Salinas Valley, examines a spinach crop at one of his family's farms.

state. A person who ate some of the greens became one of 146 people in 23 states sickened. One person has died.

The spinach tested positive

for the same strain of *E. coli* Juan Bautista, Calif.

The tainted greens—conventionally grown spinach, not organic—came from one of the farms that supplies spinach to

Natural Selection, said a company spokeswoman.

Other bags of fresh spinach recovered elsewhere in the country also were being tested

in the investigation.

Investigators began visiting farms in the Salinas Valley on Tuesday, seeking signs of past flooding or cases in which contaminated surface areas had come into contact with crops. They also were looking for potential sources of bacteria inside packing plants.

California produces 74 percent of the nation's fresh spinach crop. The Salinas Valley accounts for about three-quarters of the state's share, and it has been the focus of the investigation. The area has links to both Natural Selection Foods and a second company that has also recalled fresh spinach products, River Ranch Fresh Foods of Salinas.

A third company, RLB Food Distributors of West Caldwell, N.J., has recalled Balducci's and FreshPro brand spinach products.

Among those victims who could provide a date, they reported falling sick between Aug. 19 and Sept. 5, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

New Mexico's public health laboratory isolated *E. coli* from the bag of opened spinach and then completed "DNA fingerprinting" tests late Tuesday. State and federal officials then matched it to the strain of the bacteria—*E. coli* O157:H7—implicated in the outbreak.