

An Industry's Journey to Reduce Foodborne Illness

Bonnie Fernandez-Fenaroli

Center for Produce Safety

University of California, Davis
1477 Drew Avenue, Suite 101
Davis, CA 95618
Fax: (530) 757-5717

In the fall of 2006, a dark mood fell over the produce industry as news spread that spinach contaminated with E.coli O157:H7 at a single farm had caused the death of five people, the youngest a 2-year-old from Chubbuck, Idaho. These casualties were someone's sister, child, grandmother, and friend.

It was a solemn moment followed by solemn deliberations among industry leaders that action was needed. It was hard to decipher that one farm could cause so much damage. There were just too many questions in need of answers to responsibly put a serious effort forward to reduce the risk of foodborne illness in produce. Eight months later the Center for Produce Safety (CPS) was born.

The architects of CPS knew that reducing foodborne illness in produce could not be accomplished by a few. The minds of many were needed and a global approach was imperative. We initiated a partnership with the University of California, Davis, and organized a stakeholder coalition with the best and the brightest from industry, allied industry, regulatory agencies, science and non-governmental organizations. A strategic plan was initiated and within five years, CPS raised \$10.6 million to fund 69 projects to reduce foodborne illness risk in produce.

The organization is structured to be inclusive and transparent. The CPS Board of Advisors is made up of industry and stakeholders. It sets the strategic path for CPS and determines the organization's priorities -- research, knowledge transfer, and funding. The CPS Technical Committee identifies research priorities, reviews research proposals and supports funded scientists with access to industry practices and knowledge. All research results are shared at the annual CPS Produce Research Symposium as well as posted on the CPS website and distributed by the many funded scientists and research partners.

The CPS Partner in Research (PIR) program is now a destination to collaborate, pool funds, and avoid research duplication. Throughout its first five years, CPS has cultivated domestic and international research collaborations. The produce industry demands a nimble and flexible CPS that can turn on a dime to meet its public health mandate. In January 2012, four months after an outbreak of Listeria in cantaloupes on a single farm in Colorado demanded urgent action, CPS organized a meeting of industry, academia and regulatory experts to identify critical next steps. CPS ultimately funded research recommendations from the meeting and a collective group of industry organizations drafted the first national cantaloupe safety guidelines. CPS performed a similar role this year when it coordinated research strategy on wash water sanitation and validation.