

**E. coli strain found in pasture
Officials test cattle manure for direct link to bacteria in spinach from adjacent fields.**

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Government investigators have found the same virulent strain of E. coli that has sickened nearly 200 people around the nation in cattle manure on pastureland adjacent to two Salinas-area spinach fields, officials announced Tuesday.

The discovery, however, doesn't end the search for a smoking gun.

Investigators are awaiting results from genetic analyses to determine whether there is a direct link between the E. coli found in the pasture and the bacteria found in bagged spinach, said Kevin Reilly, deputy director of Prevention Services for the Department of Health Services.

The presence of the virulent strain in manure is not surprising: The so-called O157:H7 variety of E. coli is commonly found in the intestines of cattle.

Even if the genetic material does match, officials still would be left with the question of how the manure could have contaminated spinach in the nearby fields.

"How it gets from the cattle to the farm is what our investigation is all about right now," Reilly said.

Linking potential sources of the harmful bacteria to contaminated food has been a recurring problem. The latest outbreak is the ninth incident in the past decade to be traced to greens grown in the Salinas Valley.

All previous investigations have failed to confirm the source of the harmful bacteria.

Reilly on Tuesday also announced that the number of illnesses linked definitively to the outbreak nationwide has grown to 192 across 26 states, including California. Those have led to one death and 98 hospitalizations, including 30 cases of hemolytic uremic syndrome, which can cause kidney failure. Another 33 cases are under investigation.

The actual number of illnesses caused by the outbreak is likely substantially higher than those figures reflect, though. For every case of E. coli recorded during an outbreak, 20 others go unreported, according to an estimate from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The outbreak led to a nationwide spinach recall that started Sept. 15.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Friday lifted the alert, based on the determination that all the spinach implicated in the outbreak has either been eaten, destroyed or recalled by the company that processed it, Natural Selection Foods LLC of San Juan Bautista.