

**E. coli probe making headway**  
**Information gleaned in spinach investigation may help prevent outbreaks**

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SAN FRANCISCO - Like lab technicians on a crime-scene TV drama, investigators have tracked a strain of bacteria over thousands of miles - from bagged spinach in Midwestern refrigerators to the guts of a wild pig in the hills of California's central coast.

While they may never pinpoint the exact source of the E.coli blamed for killing three people and sickening more than 200, they have come closer than ever before. And experts say the investigation has yielded valuable clues for preventing future outbreaks.

"We've completely overhauled the way we test and package greens," said Samantha Cabaluna, a spokeswoman for Natural Selection Foods LLC, the company that packaged the tainted spinach.

But that's little solace to victims and their families, for whom even a relatively fast and successful investigation like this one has seemed painfully long.

"This was a long, convoluted story that took a long time to unfold," said Ken Costello, whose elderly mother-in-law was among those who died.

At first, there were only scattered reports of people falling sick. A 6-year-old boy in Wisconsin had bad cramps. A 12-year-old girl in Kentucky was hospitalized for vomiting. Then an elderly woman in Wisconsin died.

With similar food poisoning cases popping up in far-flung states, health officials began posting DNA profiles of the responsible bacteria to a national database operated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.