

An epidemic of foodborne illness linked to Hawai'i produce could do lasting harm to our agricultural industry.

Keeping Food and Farmworkers Safe

Hear the name “*E. coli*,” and your next thought might be “spinach.” In 2006, California-grown spinach contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7 sickened nearly 200 individuals, causing over \$77 million in industry losses and three deaths. An epidemic of foodborne illness linked to Hawai'i produce could do lasting harm to our

agricultural industry and our reputation as a safe tourist destination. Even worse, it could needlessly injure and kill.

The Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation has funded a program through which CTAHR has coached more than 40 growers in safe food production and best handling practices. Program manager Jim Hollyer, educator Luisa Castro, and extension agents Lynn Nakamura-Tengan and Jari Sugano offer free on-farm safety coaching to limit contamination of produce, especially ground-grown crops that may be eaten raw. Also participating are food science professor Yong Li, who performs microbiological testing, and coordinator Vanessa Troegner, who has helped design signage, hand-washing stations, and caddies to keep harvest baskets off the ground.

During an initial farm review, the “coach” will assess more than 40 criteria affecting worker and consumer health, including hygiene and first-aid equipment, recordkeeping, pesticide handling procedures, sanitizing all surfaces that come into contact with food, and keeping animals away from the production and packing areas. At a follow-up meeting, the coach conducts a mock audit identical to the audits that the Hawai'i Department of Agriculture performs on behalf of food-safety certifier PrimusLabs.com. 30 farms have completed the mock audit. Of these, 14 are now PrimusLabs-certified; the remaining 16 are in the process of gaining certification, which can open new retail markets to growers.

The program builds on past food safety efforts such as the development of a solar-powered water pasteurizer to provide sterile water for washing produce at remote sites. Future goals include the development of rapid assays for foodborne pathogens that can be conducted in the field.



Extension agents Lynn Nakamura-Tengan and Randall Hamasaki conduct a farm review on Maui.



Farm safety educator Luisa Castro collects water samples during a farm certification mock audit.