

Testimony by Bill Brim
National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement Hearings
September 30 – October 1, 2009
Jacksonville, FL

My name is Bill Brim. I am the co-owner of Lewis Taylor Farms and Quality Produce, Inc., a farm and shipping operation in Tifton, Georgia. The farm was originally established as a vegetable seedling operation by my father-in-law in the 1940's. Today we still grow vegetable seedlings, approximately 115 million vegetable transplants and 18 million pine seedlings however, our operations have expanded to also include 4500 acres of mixed vegetables. Included in the 4500 vegetable acres are 120 acres of cabbage and 20 acres of kale. Lewis Taylor Farms is classified as a large farm operation under SBA guidelines and Quality Produce is classified as a large handler.

Three years ago, September 2006, I watched with horror as the US Food and Drug Administration issued an unprecedented 'do not eat' advisory related to spinach. As we now know, the FDA advisory was caused by an outbreak of E. coli 0157:H7 that sickened over 200 people and eventually caused three deaths. I thought at the time how terrible for those growers that did not have any of the contaminated spinach . . . the entire industry was suffering from that one incident. All I could do at the time was offer a prayer for those growers devastated by the incident and thank God I was not growing any spinach at the time.

However, less than 24 months later, I found myself in a similar situation with the tomato fiasco during the summer of 2008. This time I was one of the effected growers. In June of 2008 we began harvesting what appeared to be one of our best tomato crops in a number of years. Less than two weeks later, FDA began issuing consumer warnings concerning salmonella in tomatoes. While all of the official FDA statements identified Georgia as a 'safe' state, the market dried up. I had over 25 acres of tomatoes that were not harvested because we had no market, roughly a \$1.5 million loss.

Both of these situations occurred due to a failure in the execution of the farm's standard operating procedures or an inadequate food safety practice.

Because Lewis Taylor Farms has always been an advocate of a strong food safety policy we support the National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement. We were the first farm certified under the Georgia GAP food safety program in 2001. At Lewis Taylor Farms food safety oversight and considerations have gone from a low priority 10 years ago to today being an essential tool for us in order to produce, harvest and sell produce. It is one of our top focuses at Lewis Taylor Farms. We have 2 full time employees that are responsible for insuring food safety compliance in our farm and packing operations.

It is my belief the NLGMA is an excellent example of our industry coming together, developing a unified proposal, and recommending a national program to benefit the consuming public with a stronger food safety policy. As proposed, the National Leafy Green Marketing Agreement will develop food safety metrics that are based on sound science and specific to regions to reduce the potential for microbial contamination in leafy green crops.

Leafy greens growers have faced many challenges in recent years particularly as it relates to the cost of production. The costs for disease and insect protection along with crop fertilization have significantly increased. Our fertilization costs alone have increased over 350% since 2005. While the production input costs are sky rocketing, the price we receive for our crop has remained flat. Yet I come here advocating a national leafy greens marketing agreement that includes an assessment because I believe it will actually help our industry...and my farm.

It is my hope the NLGMA food safety metrics for leafy greens that includes good agricultural practices, good manufacturing practice and good handling practices will eventually be accepted by all companies purchasing leafy greens. I understand in California many companies are moving away from having their own audit, or 'super' metrics, and instead accepting the California LGMA guidelines for their CA operations.

As this National Leafy Green Marketing Agreement matures, I hope a similar practice evolves. Having one food safety audit, accepted by most of my customers would save the industry and our farmers money. I currently under go three audits a year for various customers. By having a science based, regional specific national food safety metrics would be beneficial for most growers.

While I cannot speak for all Georgia growers, I do know most of our large to mid-sized producers in Georgia follow good agricultural practices and handling food safety procedures similar to those we follow on our farm. Food safety is critically important to our state and industry. In fact, this issue is so important that the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association has a full time staff person working with our GFVGA membership to insure Georgia produce has been grown under best management practices and our growers adhere to good agricultural practices.

A national leafy greens marketing agreement would enable leafy greens handlers across the United States to work together to enhance the marketability of fresh leafy green vegetables by providing for USDA validation and verification of program compliance. This would, most importantly, improve consumer confidence in leafy greens.

Thank you for holding this hearing and I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of the National Leafy Green Marketing Agreement.