

Outbreaks pressure produce industry to step up safety

A lettuce scare over Thanksgiving

By **CANDICE CHOI**
Associated Press

NEW YORK — After repeated food poisoning outbreaks linked to romaine lettuce, the produce industry is confronting the failure of its own safety measures in preventing contaminations.

The E. coli outbreak announced just before Thanksgiving follows one in the spring that sickened more than 200 people and killed five, and another last year that sickened 25 and killed one. No deaths have been reported in the latest outbreak, but the dozens of ill-

nesses highlight the challenge of eliminating risk for vegetables grown in open fields and eaten raw, the role of nearby cattle operations that produce huge volumes of manure and the delay of stricter federal food safety regulations.

A contested aspect of the regulation, for example, would require testing irrigation water for E. coli. The Food and Drug Administration put the measure on hold when the produce industry said such tests wouldn't necessarily help prevent outbreaks. Additional regulations on sanitation for workers and equipment — other potential sources of contamination — only recently started being implemented.

FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said he thinks the combination of rules, once

fully in place, will make vegetables safer to eat.

"I don't think any one element of this is going to be the magic bullet," Gottlieb said.

Health officials say improved detection may make outbreaks seem more frequent. Still, that is intensifying pressure on growers and regulators to prevent, catch and contain contamination.

It's not yet known how romaine got contaminated in the latest outbreak.

The spring outbreak was traced to romaine from Yuma, Arizona. Irrigation water tainted with manure was identified as a likely culprit, and investigators noted the presence of a large animal feeding operation nearby.

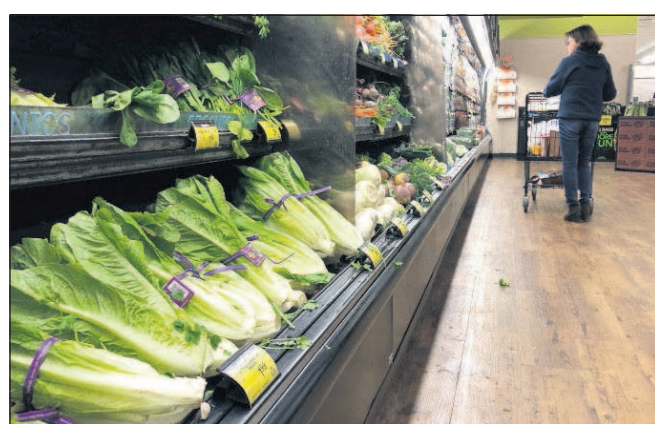
Subsequently, an industry agreement in Arizona and Cal-

ifornia was adjusted to expand buffer zones between vegetable fields and livestock. The industry says the change was in place for lettuce now being grown in Yuma, which hasn't been implicated in the latest outbreak. But Trevor Suslow of the Produce Marketing Association said there isn't consensus about the exact distances that might effectively prevent contamination.

He noted specific buffer zones aren't required by the new federal rules on produce safety.

"They look to the industry to determine what is the appropriate distance," Suslow said.

Growers in Yuma also started treating irrigation water that would touch plant leaves with chlorine to kill potential contaminants, Suslow said.



AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill

Romaine lettuce sits on the shelves as a shopper walks through the produce area of an Albertsons market in Simi Valley, Calif.

But he said such treatment raises concerns about soil and human health.

Meanwhile, the proximity of produce fields to cattle operations is likely to continue posing a problem. Travis Fergues of the milk producer Organic Valley noted consolidation in the dairy industry is leading to bigger livestock operations that produce massive volumes of manure.

Already, the industry agree-

ment in Arizona and California requires leafy green growers to test water for generic E. coli.

But James Rogers, director of food safety research at Consumer Reports, said it's important to make water testing a federal requirement. Since romaine is often chopped up and bagged, a single contaminated batch from one farm that skips testing could make a lot of people sick, he said.

Mystery ballot could sway control of Alaska state government

A tied race for state House

By **BECKY BOHRER**
Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska — It's a sign that every vote does count.

A single mystery ballot found on a precinct table on Election Day but not counted then could decide a tied Alaska state House race and thwart Republican efforts to control the chamber and all of state government.

The ballot arrived in Juneau last Friday in a secrecy sleeve in a bin with other ballot materials. Officials were investigating its origins and handling before deciding whether to tally it.

"People kept calling it close," Democrat candidate Kathryn Dodge said of the race for the House seat in Fairbanks. "I just didn't know it was going to be squeaky."

A recount is scheduled for today after the race between Dodge and Republican Bart LeBon was previously certified as a tie, at 2,661 votes apiece. The uncounted ballot appears to be marked for Dodge.

The outcome will have big political implications. If LeBon wins, Republicans will control the state House

in addition to the state Senate and the governor's office.

If Dodge wins, the House would be split 20-20, between Republicans and the remnant of a coalition that is largely comprised of Democrats but includes two Republicans.

For the candidates, it's been a three-week roller-coaster ride marked by lead changes before the tie was declared and by the appearance of the mystery ballot.

Elections director Josie Bahnke said she wants to ensure that every vote cast by an eligible voter is counted.

Dodge, a former member of the Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly, said it appears the ballot was not put through the scanner on election night. She believes it's valid and should be counted.

LeBon, a retired banker, said he has questions about the handling of the ballot and expects a legal challenge from whoever loses the recount. He says questions about other ballots also could be raised during the recount.

If the race remains tied after the recount and possible legal challenges, state law calls for a winner to be determined "by lot." A coin toss decided a tied House race in 2006.

"I've come too far to have a coin toss settle this," LeBon said.

Lawmakers call for detention camp reforms

A remote tent city

By **MARTHA MENDOZA**
and **GARANACE BURKE**
Associated Press

Lawmakers Thursday called for stricter background checks, more mental health support and a public hearing to further investigate problems at a massive detention camp for migrant teens raised by a federal watchdog report and an Associated Press investigation earlier this week.

More than 2,300 teens are being held at the remote tent city in Tornillo, Texas, which opened in June as a temporary, emergency shelter but now appears to be becoming more permanent, with ongoing construction at costs that can reach \$1,200 per child per day, the AP reported Tuesday.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General on Tuesday raised concerns that the private contractor running Tornillo has not put its 2,100 staffers through FBI background checks, and that they're allowed to have just one mental health clinician for every 100 children.

"These issues must be addressed and remedied without delay," said U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-New York, in a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar. It was co-signed by other Democratic House members. They asked for a briefing before Dec. 11 and a hearing in the new Congress early next year.



Ivan Pierre Aguirre

Migrant teens are led in a line inside the Tornillo detention camp holding more than 2,300 migrant teens in Tornillo, Texas. notforsale

"The problems we are seeing in Tornillo are as shameful as they were in June and symptoms of a much larger problem that we've spent years ignoring — a broken immigration system," said U.S. Rep. Will Hurd, D-Texas, whose district includes the detention camp. "Similar to building a wall from sea to shining sea, detaining kids in Tornillo is the most expensive and least effective policy approach that fails to address root causes of migration flows or make anyone safer."

Hurd and others said the current border crisis must be solved by working with Central American leaders.

The IG memo, which put the detention camp under a national spotlight, detailed

how the former director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement Scott Lloyd granted the contractor running Tornillo, San Antonio-based BCFS Health and Human Services, a waiver in June to staff up without typically required child abuse and neglect checks.

Those checks can raise a red flag about any job candidate with a record of hurting a child. There were two reasons for the waiver, according to the inspector general: first, the agency was under pressure to open the detention camp quickly, and second, Lloyd's agency assumed Tornillo staff

had already undergone FBI fingerprint checks. They had not.

BCFS has filed more than 30 reports on "significant incidents" from Tornillo.

Texas Republican U.S. Sen. John Cornyn said the detained teens must be kept safe.

"We don't want anybody staffing those facilities who are going to be a potential danger to the population housed there," Cornyn said.

HHS spokesman Mark Weber said Thursday the agency was working quickly to resolve the issues at Tornillo, but did not provide further details.

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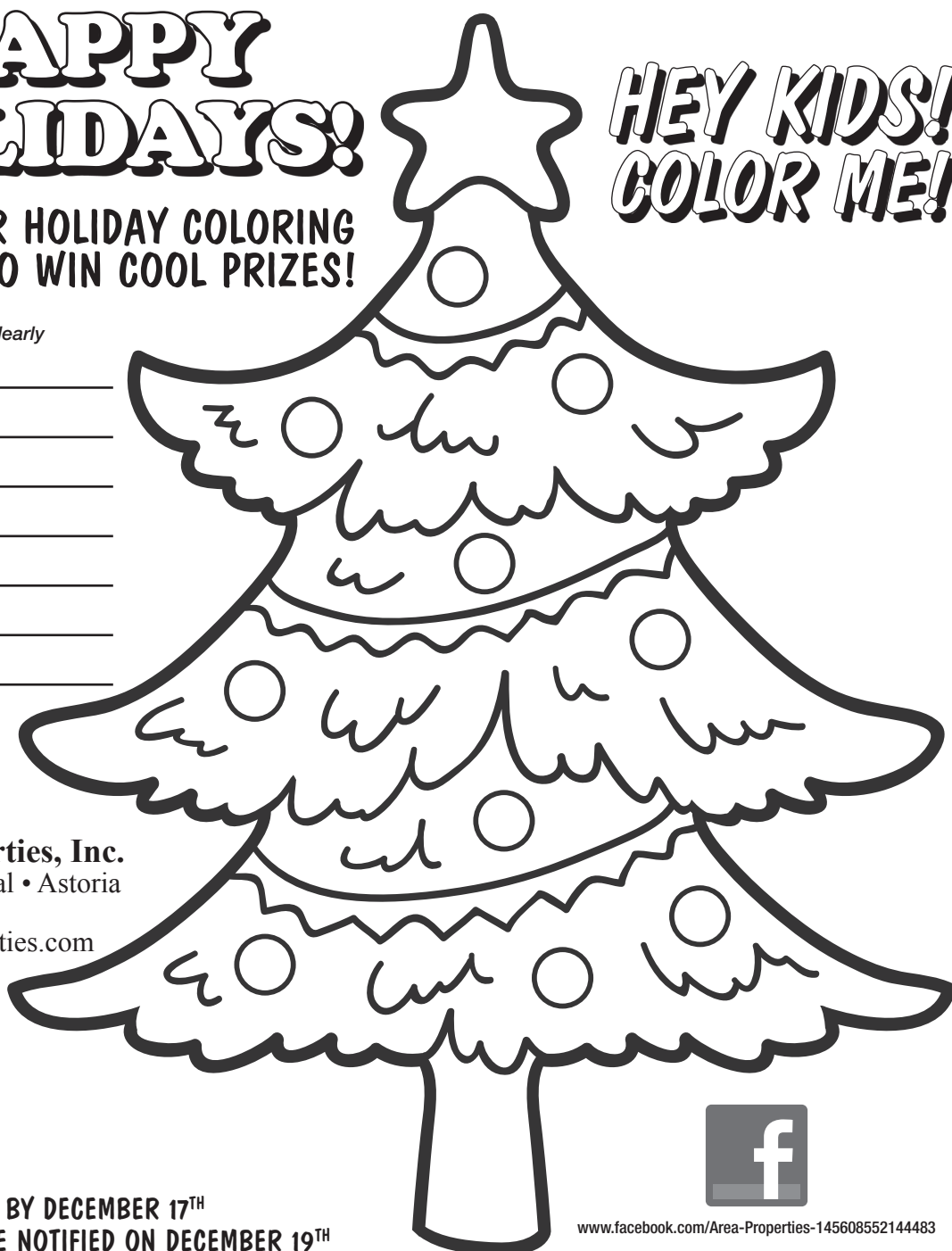
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