

Taylor Farms, Big Food Supplier, Grapples With Frequent Recalls

By [STEPHANIE STROM](#)

Taylor Farms, the large vegetable producer whose salad mix is being investigated in connection with an outbreak of illness involving hundreds of people in 22 states, has had [an unusual number of voluntary recalls](#) for potentially tainted products in the last three years.

The recent investigation of greens used at Olive Garden, Red Lobster and possibly other restaurant chains follows three recalls by Taylor Farm this year. The company initiated three others in 2012 and three in 2011, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Bruce Taylor, chief executive of Taylor Farms, attributed the number of recalls to the sheer size of his company — it sells as much salad as its next three largest competitors combined. “Just if you do the sheer math, our recalls relative to our size are fewer than anybody else,” Mr. Taylor said.

Only the most recent was prompted by an outbreak of illnesses, he added. Since June of this year, more than 600 cases of cyclosporiasis, an intestinal disease caused by *Cyclospora cayetanensis*, a parasite that is transmitted through feces, have been reported. Although not all reported cases were tied to Taylor Farms produce, this is the largest outbreak of cyclosporiasis since 1997.

Food safety experts said the number was somewhat higher than they would expect, even given Taylor’s size. “While produce companies have by far the most recalls among food companies in general, I’d say one every 12 to 18 months is more the standard,” said Gene Grabowski, a consultant who assists companies in dealing with the public and the media over food recalls.

Taylor competitors Dole and Fresh Express, a unit of Chiquita Brands, each had four recalls in 2012 and one in 2011. Neither company has conducted a recall so far this year, according to F.D.A. records.

Bill Marler, a lawyer who specializes in food safety litigation, also said that even for a company of its size, the rate of recalls by Taylor seemed a bit high. “That’s quite a number of recalls over that time period,” Mr. Marler said.

But several of those recalls could have been prompted by random inspections by state health agencies under a federal program that is now defunct, he said.

Taylor and other large produce companies had successfully lobbied to get rid of it, arguing that by the time the program identified a pathogen, the tainted product had already long since been consumed, making it hard to recall.

Shelly Burgess, a spokeswoman for the F.D.A., which is responsible for the safety of fruits and vegetables, among other foods, said there was no specific number of recalls that would require greater scrutiny by the agency.

“In assessing whether a firm should be subject to increased F.D.A. scrutiny, the agency takes many risk factors into account beyond the number of recalls the firm has initiated,” Ms. Burgess wrote in an e-mail.

Mr. Taylor said many of the recalls were prompted by the company’s own food safety regimen. For example, preliminary company tests drove the decision to issue a 39-state recall of organic baby spinach that was potentially contaminated with E. coli, he said.

“We have a protocol where we do an initial test and get an initial positive or negative and then follow that with a confirmation test that gives a positive or negative,” he said. “I violated that protocol, though, out of an abundance of caution, acting to recall the product before we got the final result.”

Mr. Taylor said the final testing found no contamination, turning the company’s recall into a withdrawal of any remaining products from the market. “It was a fire drill we didn’t need to do,” he said.

And two of Taylor’s recalls this year — almost 700 cases of its BBQ Flavored Ranch Salad with Chicken and a Black Forest ham and Swiss cheese sandwich sold under the Wawa stores’ name — involved undeclared allergens like peanuts, not pathogens. “We make 700 items with over 2,000 components,” Mr. Taylor said. “If an employee picks up the wrong item, we have a recall.”

This week, Taylor Farms resumed operations at its Mexican processing facilities, which were the source of the greens tainted with Cyclospora, after an inspection by the Food and Drug Administration found conditions met known safety protocols.

The Centers for Disease Control, which is working with the F.D.A. on the matter, said this week that while investigations in Nebraska and Iowa had linked the outbreaks there to products from Taylor Farms of Mexico, preliminary analysis of more recent cases in Texas suggested the greens involved did not come from there.

“Although the investigation of cases in 2013 is ongoing, available evidence suggests that not all of the cases of cyclosporiasis in the various states are directly related to each other,” the C.D.C. said.

Mr. Marler said he had not yet filed a lawsuit in the case for that reason. “Something else is going on, and I think it’s probably environmental,” he said.

Mr. Taylor wondered whether flooding earlier this summer in the areas where the problem surfaced provided the conditions for bacterial infections. He said notices posted in Nebraska, Iowa and Texas had warned residents in flooded regions to boil their water. “It’s pure speculation on my part,” he said, “Iowa and Nebraska represent somewhere around 4 percent of the salad sold from our plant in Mexico in any given week.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 30, 2013

An earlier version of this article misstated the recent action involving salad mix from Taylor Farms. The company’s produce is being investigated in connection with an outbreak of cyclosporiasis; the mix was not recalled, as any that might have been a source of the illness had most likely already been consumed or was no longer in the food system. The earlier version also misstated the nature of Cyclospora cayetanensis. It is a parasite, not a strain of bacteria.