CNN Spinach Epidemic 9/15/06
Interview with Paula Zahn

ZAHN: That was Jonathan Freed reporting for us tonight from Milwaukee. Ninety five cases, 19 states. In fact another report we're up to 20 states. How can this happen? Let's ask Jeffrey Nelken, a forensic food safety expert. Good of you to join us, sir. So what is the deal about organically raised spinach? Is it more susceptible to E.Coli bacteria than non organic?

JEFFREY NELKEN, FORENSIC FOOD SAFETY EXPERT: It's more an issue of how the product is handled. Remember, the product is coming from the earth and then there's fertilizer involved. And we want to really find out what went wrong as we figure out the pieces of this story. And as was mentioned earlier, that's the challenge of the epidemiologists.

ZAHN: So there's no difference you think between organically raised and non-organically raised in terms of its susceptibility to E.Coli bacteria?

NELKEN: Right, exactly. The bacteria is there in the fertilizer. It could be in the processing and the handling, so it's a 50/50 call.

ZAHN: We now have just learned from that conference call where the FDA got a bunch of journalists on the phone, that they have been investigating farms in Salinas, California, one farmer particularly now being targeted as the potential source of this. Is this a growing problem?

NELKEN: Well the problem is that we've developed several years ago what we call a haccp (ph) program and this is where we study the process from the field all the way to the fork and what we're looking at is we've identified several situations where it could be in the field, the issues coming up. There could be contaminated water. It could be workers. It could be in the packinghouse and that's why we have to go every step of the way and see where did it go wrong.

ZAHN: But if this product has made it all the way to supermarkets does it mean that there just aren't enough random samples being taken during this process?

NELKEN: Well it's not only a question of random samples but it's also a question of how the product is handled from the field every step of the way. And you could take the random samples and still not find the E.Coli because it may just be in sporadic batches.

ZAHN: So you're basically telling us tonight it's really very difficult to stop this from happening?

NELKEN: Exactly.

ZAHN: Well, that's not too encouraging for spinach and lettuce eaters out there. But we will understand the scope of the problem as you described tonight. Jeffrey Nelken, thanks, appreciate your expertise.