



Produce, well water top concerns after recent flooding

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MADISON – Consumers and producers alike should be concerned about the safety of food grown in flooded fields, according to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

“Two things generally happen in a flood that can have potentially negative food safety impacts. First is the flooding of fields with contaminated water and second is contamination of well water that is used to wash produce,” said Peter Haase, Bureau of Food and Recreational Businesses Director for the Division of Food and Recreational Safety.

Generally speaking, state and federal food safety regulations do not directly address flooding. Regulations governing application of manure and pesticides also do not address flooding. The only absolute is that produce that has come in contact with flood water is considered unfit for human or animal consumption.

“Flood water almost certainly contains pathogens, chemicals or both. Produce can be contaminated directly or indirectly. Generally, if flood water has touched it, it shouldn’t be sold or consumed,” Haase says.

But there are some exceptions. While leafy greens touched directly by flood water cannot be sold and should not be consumed by humans or animals, crops located near flooded areas on which the edible part of the plant did not come in contact with flood water should be evaluated case by case.

“If the edible portion develops after flood waters recede, it’s not automatically considered unfit for consumption. It is the producer’s decision whether to sell them,” Haase says. Produce with a protected fruit or impervious outer skin may be contaminated on the surface but not on the inner edible portion. Outer contamination can still be a major concern, especially with melons because pathogens on the surface are moved to the edible part as the product is sliced and eaten raw.

Producers who use well water to wash produce prior to sale should also pay close attention to the condition of their well.

Contamination should be suspected if the flood waters can enter the top of your well or migrate underground to your well from a neighbor’s flooded well, according to the Department of Natural Resources website.

“If you are growing and selling produce for sale to the public and you normally use well water to prepare it, you should switch to a known safe source and have your well disinfected,” Haase says.

A list of certified laboratories is available from the DNR website at dnr.wi.gov. The laboratory will provide you with a water sampling kit.