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

Hello, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. My name is Kent Hamilton. I operate Hamilton Growers and Southern Valley Produce in Georgia as well as Compania Agricola Valle del Sur in Yucatan, Mexico. Our operations farm over 1,700 acres of mixed vegetables including 200 acres of cabbage that would be covered under this agreement. In Mexico we grow approximately 1,100 acres of mixed vegetables. All of our domestic produce is handled, packed and shipped from our Southern Valley Produce facility in Norman Park, Georgia. According to SBA classifications I would be a large grower and a large handler. Our leafy greens operation would be classified as both a large grower and a small handler.

I am speaking today in support of the National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement which has as its primary goal . . . enhancing consumer confidence in our leafy green products.

The Agreement allows willing industry members, that voluntarily sign on to the agreement, to be the "owners" of the process. The NLGMA does not impose a top-down set of regulations but allows signatories to become committed stakeholders actively working to continuously improve food safety practices and results. These guidelines and metrics are developed and approved via the Technical Review Board and Administrative Committee. This national program will bring a clear set of science based, region specific guidelines to all producers and buyers that wish to voluntarily participate.

In recent years, microbial contamination of food products in the marketplace has,

- led to public and industry concern for food safety,
- a drop in consumer confidence of products related with food safety events,

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 and severe economic consequences for producers and handlers of those products affected.

The marketing agreement allows for the development of production and handling best practices that will be endorsed by all signatories resulting in the improvement of product quality and consumer confidence.

Absent a national marketing agreement, retailers, food service industries, and states will continue to develop and implement their own food safety standards for producers and handlers— at times competing against each other to create a competitive advantage. With a national marketing agreement, the likelihood of producers and handlers being subject to multiple inconsistent audit requirements is reduced. This could prove to be the case based on the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement (LGMA) . . . many retailers and food service industries are now accepting the LGMA audit rather than requiring their audit to be performed.

The California LGMA also conducted a nationwide survey in late February 2009 to determine how consumers view the food safety efforts by the industry. 89% of consumers had a favorable opinion when they were told about the food safety programs and mandatory government audits being implemented under the LGMA program. And, 70% of consumers said that after learning more about the LGMA food safety program their confidence in the overall safety of leafy green products increased.

Just as the producer community is plagued with diverse specifications and requirements for food safety .. so too are buyers struggling with the myriad programs that are being implemented in the field ... with a NLGMA in place there will be an established set of uniform baseline standards that could eventually be adopted by the regulatory community ... at the same time be believe industry developed guidelines will be more practical for growers and handlers based on current best practices.

In closing I strongly encourage members of the industry to endorse and embrace this National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement to insure our industry has a mechanism to organize science based guidelines, and increase consumer confidence in our products. Thank you for your time and the opportunity to submit this testimony.