



VESSEY AND COMPANY, INC.

G R O W E R S
P A C K E R S
S H I P P E R S

California Vegetables

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October 14, 2009

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service
Administrative Law Judge

Re: Proponent Testimony for the proposed national Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement No. 970

My name is Jack Vessey. I am the fourth generation, and vice president of Vessey & Company, Inc., a large leafy green grower, and a small leafy green handler. We are located in California's Imperial Valley. We currently grow 6,000 acres of conventionally grown leafy greens, consisting of the following: Iceberg Lettuce, Romaine lettuce, Leaf Lettuce, Spinach, Spring Mix, and Cabbage. And, we also grow 500 acres of organically grown leafy greens.

Our organically grown product is audited the same as our conventionally grown product. We find that there is not a difference in these audits, and it applies to both with ease.

We have been members of the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement since its inception, and I have served on the board since that time as well.

My testimony is in support of the National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement.

Prior to September of 2006 I believed that we had a sufficient food safety program, but after the events of 2006 I became concerned. When the leafy greens industry of California decided that something had to be done to the raise the bar on food safety, I was in full support of the effort. Hoping that this may be the tool that would make me feel more confident in our in house program, and it has. Having regular and random audits performed by the California Department of Food and Agriculture adds another layer of safety on our farm.

Even though I believe that we are doing an exceptional job, that includes the California LGMA, and third party audits, some buyers are still concerned. Due to this concern, many have mandated their suppliers to audits that they have invented. This in turn has made it very difficult and time consuming for my staff. It seems as if we are doing audits weekly, if not daily at times. With the possible advent of a National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, it is my hope that some of these buyers with different audits may accept a national program's audit as sufficient.

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I have learned that there are some who are concerned that a national program will have much difficulty in accommodating the differences in different growing areas. I have seen firsthand how the California LGMA has made differences in growing areas work. The Imperial Valley and Salinas Valley are about as different as it can get. One is a desert valley, and the other a coastal Valley. Yet it seems that the current California LGMA audit checklist is working in both areas.

I can understand that there may be individuals who may be concerned with cost, as I was when the California LGMA was in its infancy. I have found my investment to be well worth it, and if for some reason the California LGMA went away tomorrow, I would still be using the same audit checklist. The audits would just be done by a third party or in house. But I do believe that having USDA trained inspectors performing the audits gives the audit more credibility to the buyers. Also in regards to cost, I have reviewed the business case study financials. I believe that my costs are consistent with what was presented by the study.

I believe with the advent of a national program, buyers will be more open to a standardized audit, we will be less likely to be detrimentally impacted by the safety performance of another grower, and consumers will have more confidence in buying leafy greens.

I would like to state for the record that Vessey & Company, Inc. supports the National Leafy Green Marketing Agreement.