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Story published: Tue 28 Oct 08 11:01

## Irish food safety warning on organic fertilisers

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland has issued what it describes as a wake-up call over the increasing use of organic fertilisers in farm production.

Vegetables and fruit are at particular risk of contamination, both directly and indirectly, it warns. To minimise the danger, the authority has prepared a list of recommendations for tighter controls on the land-spreading of such materials, to be implemented by the departments of agriculture and the environment.

"This is a wake-up call," said the authority's deputy chief executive, Alan Reilly, citing the recent deadly E.coli outbreak in the US that was traced to peppers imported from Mexico. "What we are saying is that increased measures need to be taken to ensure that what has happened elsewhere does not happen here."

According to the authority, while the use of organic, municipal and industrial materials (OMI) is small in relation to farm-generated fertiliser (OA), trends indicate a significant increase in its use in Irish agriculture. Such fertilisers, it said, posed a particular safety risk when spread on land on which ready-to-eat produce is grown.

In its recommendations, the authority calls for more effective control and monitoring of the spread of such materials, including audits and the keeping of registers. The use of untreated sludge in agriculture should no longer be permitted, it says, and there should be at least a 12-month gap between the harvesting of vegetable crops and the spreading on land of treated sludge.

It recommends that the method of land-spreading used should minimise the survival and dispersal of pathogens and chemical contaminants to adjacent vegetable and other ready-to-eat crops, and to waterways. The authority also calls for the provision of "adequate resources" for the effective enforcement of the new measures and also to fund "a more comprehensive scientific assessment" of the risks to food safety from the use of such materials.

Reilly claimed that these risks were compounded by the contamination of public water systems, as had happened recently in Galway city with an outbreak of cryptosporidiosis, which made hundreds of people ill and left the community without usable supplies for several months. "Washing apples or leafy vegetables in such water – or even tomatoes grown in your own greenhouse – obviously heightens the problem," he said.

He pointed out that in 2004 alone, almost 61m tonnes of OA and OMI materials were spread on agricultural land in Ireland. And while acknowledging there are "gaps in current knowledge" on the transfer of chemical contaminants and pathogens into the food chain through such land-spreading, he said that also underlined the need both for greater research funding and for stricter legislation to limit the health hazards involved.

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