

## **E. coli found at fairs across U.S.**

The Union-Democrat  
Published: June 2, 2004  
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For the second time in two years, children who were in the livestock barns at the Calaveras County Fair have tested positive for E. coli.

Three exhibitors, ages 13, 14 and 17, who had cattle at last month's fair were found to have the bacteria in their systems.

After the 2002 fair, four 3- to 9-year-old children fell ill after eating food in the hog barns. Three tested positive for the bacteria and the fourth was never confirmed, said fair spokeswoman Laurie Giannini.

But she stressed that it was never proven the children got E. coli at the fair, adding that they were later found to have E. coli with the same DNA as a case found in Sonoma.

Although E. coli has not yet been traced back to the Calaveras County fairgrounds in either the 2002 or 2004 cases, it wouldn't be an anomaly if it were.

Dozens of people across the nation have suffered the effects of E. coli after visiting livestock areas at fairs. Cattle, hogs, goats and other animals can carry the bacteria in their intestines and pass it through their feces.

In August 2002, an E. coli breakout in Lane County, Ore., sickened 80 people and sent 22 children to the hospital. All had visited the county fair's livestock exhibit.

The bacteria was traced to an exhibition hall where goats and sheep were kept.

In the summer of 2001, 25 cases were confirmed and another 200 people reported symptoms after visiting the cattle barns and petting zoos at the Ozaukee County Fair in Wisconsin.

And more than 30 people were diagnosed with E. coli in 2000, after the Medina County Fair in Ohio.

A potentially deadly strain of the disease called E. coli O157:H7, was found in nearly 14 percent of beef cattle and 6 percent of dairy cattle at 32 state and county fairs in 2002, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture survey.

E. coli specialists with the USDA said they were surprised because the results were comparable with what might be found at a feed lot.

"How many people would take their kids in a stroller to visit a feed lot?" attorney Bill Marler asked in a phone interview from his Seattle office. "It's a little bit bizarre to think about, but it just goes to show that the public doesn't understand (the dangers associated with livestock)."

Marler made a name for himself in the 1993 Jack in the Box case in which more than 600 people contracted E. coli from undercooked hamburgers and four died. Marler sued the restaurant chain and got his clients about \$40 million.

Since then, he has specialized in lawsuits resulting from food-borne illnesses and he monitors the occurrence of E. coli across the nation. Seven days after the initial case in Angels Camp last month, he e-mailed The Union Democrat with an offer to help if more information was needed.

Marler's law firm has set up a comprehensive Web site explaining the causes, symptoms and methods of preventing E. coli infection at [www.about-ecoli.com](http://www.about-ecoli.com).

And he has started a nonprofit group called OutBreak, through which he educates various organizations on how to avoid a lawsuit resulting from E. coli infections by preventing them to begin with.

"It's a much bigger problem than the general public certainly knows," he said of E. coli at fairs.

He is currently awaiting an October trial date for the Lane County Fair case. He represents 22 children, eight of whom suffered from hemolytic uremic syndrome, a resulting kidney complication. One of the children needs a kidney transplant.

"There was a failure to warn the public of the risks of attending the county fair and there were inadequate hand-washing stations," Marler said.

The Lane County fairgrounds had three hand-washing stations and now has 26, he said.

Calaveras County's fairgrounds has four hand-washing stations and nine sanitization stations, Giannini said. They were put in before the 2002 E. coli cases, she said.

"The experts all sort of feel that had there been additional hand-washing stations and notices for people to wash their hands and notices for people to be alert to the risks ... that outbreak, and frankly most zootonic outbreaks, wouldn't occur," Marler said.

"The reality is we have to sort of adapt to these emerging and changing pathogens," he said. "The fair industry is so wrapped up in the Americana of apple pie and the 4-H cows and cotton candy ... they haven't come to grips with the fact that this can kill people."

Testing an option?

Animal feces should be tested before animals are taken to fairs, Marler said.

"You could do a stool culture on a cow, and if they test positive, you don't let the cow come to the fair, period," he said. E. coli can be transient in animals, meaning an animal may test positive for it one day and negative the next, but, "at least you're taking a real good strong shot at eliminating cows that you know are positive.

"The technology exists to do that and it's very cheap, like \$50," he said. "It should be the price of admission -- if you want (the animal) to be shown, you pay the price to have this test done."

"You couldn't do it," Giannini said of testing animal's feces before a fair. "I'm not sure, because I'm not a scientist, but animal feces is probably going to have it. The idea is not to eat it.

"There is just no way logistically that we could test the feces. I don't even think there's that science available here and I don't think it's that big of a problem."

As another precautionary measure, there should be signs everywhere at the fair, Marler said. "At the Lane County Fair, you can't go anywhere (without seeing a sign)," he said. "It says, 'warning, these animals can cause illness in human beings.'"

People should be banned from eating or drinking in fair cattle barns and the areas should be washed with a disinfectant, he added.

Giannini said many preventive measures are already in place at the Calaveras fairgrounds, including the hand-washing stations and sanitization stations with antibacterial lotion available.

"All of our community clubs are sent letters ... just asking them to distribute to the exhibitors, saying they have to wash their hands and use good hygiene," she said.

Now letters of another sort have been sent out by the Calaveras County Public Health Department to alert parents of exhibitors in the cattle area during the May 13-16 fair that three teenagers have contracted E. coli.

But Giannini maintains, "there's no way of saying that they got it at the fairgrounds.

"It's circumstantial -- they're looking for a common link," she said. "We don't know if the three kids that exhibited beef even have the same strain. What we're doing is just making sure that people are looking for the symptoms, if their children have these symptoms that they get the correct amount of medical attention."

Meanwhile, the Health Department has sent genetic samples from the three boys who went to the fair, as well as samples from three Angels Camp children who were found to have E. coli in early May, to a state lab in Richmond.

The tests will show if all six got the exact same strain of bacteria, which would indicate if each person got it from the same source.

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