**Public Policy Update**

**Assuring the Safety of Plants for Food: Plant Pathologists and Food Safety Professionals Working Together**

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Bringing the power of plant pathology to bear on food safety problems in plants was the *topique du jour* in Washington recently. A half-day listening session on “Assuring the Safety of Fresh Produce” was cosponsored by APS and FDA on November 12, 2009. Talks by APS members were presented at the FDA Center for Food Safety and Nutrition (CFSAN) in the morning and at the USDA’s Whitten Building in the afternoon. Organized by Public Policy Board (PPB) Chair Jacque Fletcher and APS’s Washington liaison Kellye Eversole, along with FDA’s Michael Mahovic, the FDA event was at the request of the FDA CFSAN leader, Samir Assar, at the conclusion of his first attendance at the APS Annual Meeting in Portland, OR. As a food scientist, Assar was impressed with the breadth of research and outreach undertaken by plant pathologists, from extension specialists with their knowledge and trusted relationships with growers to the applied and basic research scientists in APS who represent a vast knowledge of the interactions among pathogens, plants, and cropping environments. The symposium at FDA is timely as congressional action is moving forward on the Food Safety Enhancement Act of 2009 with recent approval by the House of Representatives and consideration ongoing in the Senate. The proposed legislation would give the FDA recall power on food and bring farms under the purview of FDA via mandatory farming practices designed to ensure the safety of fresh produce in the United States. FDA is drafting voluntary guidelines to assure safe food at this time.

The morning listening session was attended by key members of the FDA CFSAN produce safety staff. APS speakers included Fletcher, Oklahoma State University; Jeri Barak, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Manan Sharma, USDA-ARS-Beltsville, MD; Jerry Bartz, University of Florida; Sally Miller, Ohio State University; Steven Rideout, Virginia Technical Cooperative Extension; and Eversole, Eversole Associates. FDA was interested in hearing about detailed research conducted by plant pathologists working in the area of food safety. Fletcher gave an overview of ongoing research among APS members that relates directly to the health problem of human pathogens on fresh produce. Barak highlighted basic research that included *Salmonella* gene characterization, the influence of plant-associated bacteria on the survival and proliferation of *Salmonella*, and efforts to identify *Salmonella* “resistance” in Solanaceae crops. Sharma spoke about the efforts in his laboratory to answer the question of pathogenic *E. coli* internalization in lettuce and differential virulence gene expression between cells colonizing ground beef or lettuce. Bartz reported on the internalization of pathogens through the tomato stem scar and cantaloupe netting and under what conditions this internalization may occur in the packing house and field. Miller shared some of the preliminary results of a survey of the perceptions and understanding of good agricultural practices and regulations from medium-sized growers in the Midwest. Rideout discussed the role of cooperative extension in helping farmers avoid conditions that could lead to foodborne illness outbreaks and new FDA research at his agricultural research station. Finally, Eversole spoke about APS’s Food Safety Research Initiative that includes 1) the creation of a cooperative multiagency effort, including FDA, USDA, NSF, and CDC, among others; 2) the plan for back-to-back symposia at the annual national meetings of both the International Association for Food Protection (IAFP), August 1–5 in Anaheim, CA, and APS, August 7–11, 2010, in Nashville, TN; and 3) new funding initiatives spanning the full spectrum of plant pathology and food safety. The FDA gave our APS group a warm reception, welcoming plant pathology contributions to food safety research and making plans for future collaborations.

In the afternoon session at USDA headquarters, the diverse audience included CFSAN members who were unable to attend the morning session; researchers from the University of Maryland, Georgetown University, USDA-ARS Food and Nutrition Service, and the Institute of Food Technologists; and a member of the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. APS speakers repeated their morning presentations with the addition of Mahovic, FDA-CFSAN, who spoke about the FDA’s interest in the APS Food Safety Research Initiative. APS was encouraged to consider the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program as a source of potential funding; details are available at www.ams.usda.gov/scbgp.

This double symposium established a good working base to prepare for the dual symposia at the IAFP and APS annual meetings, a potential full-scale workshop in Washington in 2010/2011, and the creation of an interagency funding initiative on produce safety.