

## Department of Fish and Game

### Current Issues

Fall 2010

#### **Wildlife Management and Improved Food Safety**

In September 2006, an outbreak of E. coli occurred in San Benito County and was linked to contaminated spinach originating from the area. Sadly, the outbreak resulted in 205 cases of human illness and three deaths. Initially, there was an assumption that wildlife was the primary transmitter of the bacteria and E. coli was, in fact, isolated in wild pigs that crossed and fed in the spinach fields. This generated a widespread movement to eradicate and exclude wildlife from agricultural lands and consideration was given to the removal of wildlife-dependent habitat from the vicinity. However, even with the wild pig test results, there is an absence of scientific evidence that identifies wildlife as a true source of contamination and transmission of bacteria in farms and production fields. It is important to note the San Benito County and Salinas Valley growing areas have been the center of attention for this issue, however, similar issues exist for Ventura, Imperial Valley and Kern County agriculture.

Agriculture interests understand the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) need to protect fish, wildlife and habitat as the state's resource trustee, and most farmers enjoy having wildlife and habitat on their farms. DFG understands the agricultural industry's need to provide safe food for human consumption and cooperates fully in determining the impact, if any, of wildlife on healthy agricultural operations. Working collaboratively, DFG and the affected parties identified the goals of safe food for human consumption and sound wildlife management, and adopted solutions to ensure these goals are met.

The vegetable industry, however, believes there are too many uncertainties and together with the California Department of Food and Agriculture have adopted a broad approach to exclude, remove or eliminate all wildlife in and near production fields. Techniques such as the use of rodent bait stations, the spreading of poison grain onto the ground, poisoning of ponds, trapping and shooting of animals, removal of riparian habitat and trees, and the installation of six to eight foot fences have been employed to keep wildlife out of the fields. These fences restrict wildlife movements and block connectivity corridors. Not all of the employed techniques to remove wildlife and its habitat are scientifically based and it is acknowledged there are other sources of crop contamination such as livestock, water supply and humans.

DFG has been conducting research to determine if wildlife, beyond the aforementioned wild pigs, is carrying the strain of E. coli that is detrimental to humans. With specific data and greater knowledge, practical science can inform farming and ranching communities, and help develop policy and wildlife management plans that address food safety and sustainable wildlife populations.