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Health and Safety Executive		Sector Information Minute	
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Target Audience
All FOD Inspectors in Agriculture

INTERIM GUIDANCE ON *E.COLI 0157*

This SIM alerts inspectors to concerns about the role of the wild rabbit population in the spread of *E.coli* 0157. It advises on steps being taken to clarify whether or not rabbits are a vector and reiterates the importance of personal hygiene as a primary control measure.

BACKGROUND

1 Advice and guidance on the risk of *E.coli* 0157 in agriculture is set out in Agriculture Information Sheet (AIS) No 23 (revised) *Avoiding ill health at open farms – Advice to farmers* and the associated AIS 23 Supplement (revised) *Avoiding ill health at open farms – Advice to teachers*. Further information on the risk to farmers and agricultural workers from *E.coli* 0157, on the legal requirements to control the risk of zoonoses in humans and on good occupational hygiene practises to control the spread of zoonoses can be found in AIS No 2 (revised) *Common zoonoses in agriculture*.

2 To date, veterinary and scientific opinion has been that all ruminants (cattle, sheep, goats and deer) can carry the bacterium as can a range of other animals including geese and seagulls. Rabbits however have not previously been identified as carriers of *E.coli* 0157.

3 Following an outbreak in the Great Yarmouth area last summer involving 12 human cases (10 children and 2 adults) it has been suggested that the wild rabbit population might have acted as the vector in the spread of the bacterium to members of the public visiting a wildlife park. The park was not an open farm. There was no petting area and limited contact with animals. Food and animal sources on site were eliminated as potential causes of illness. The outbreak strain was isolated from faecal samples taken from cattle in a neighbouring field, but a transmission route from these animals could not be identified.

4 Although rabbits had not previously been implicated in outbreaks of *E.coli* 0157, rabbit droppings within the wildlife park were sampled and found to be positive for the outbreak strain. Details of the outbreak and suspicion as to the role of rabbits has been reported in veterinary and environmental health journals.

INFORMATION

5 HSE has commissioned a small-scale project to establish whether or not wild rabbits are a maintenance host or vector for the bacterium. Dependent on the outcome of this initial work it may be necessary to carry out further research to identify the extent to which the organism is endemic within the UK wild rabbit population. Any further research is a matter

of public health and almost certainly outside the remit of the HSE.

6 Following completion of the initial research and consultation with relevant government departments, HSE will review and if necessary revise, existing guidance.

7 In the interim, HSE inspectors and local authorities are alerted to the possibility that rabbits may be a vector of the organism.

ACTION BY INSPECTORS

8 Irrespective of the outcome of any research, inspectors should reiterate and reinforce the importance of personal hygiene as a primary control measure for farmers, agricultural workers and visitors to open farms.

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