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## Florida growers work to restore trust in tomatoes

By Elaine Walker

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As Sylena Reid picked up a tomato at Publix, she paused before she put it into her shopping basket.

"I hope they're safe now," said Reid, 30, of Hollywood. "I can't make bruschetta without tomatoes."

After a national salmonella outbreak had knocked three popular tomato varieties off grocery shelves and restaurant menus for several days, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration cleared Florida tomatoes on Tuesday.

Publix, Winn-Dixie, Burger King and others are bringing tomatoes back. Now the challenge is to restore consumer confidence.

Returning customers like Reid to their normal tomato-buying habits is what the industry needs now. But since the FDA has yet to isolate the source of the salmonella outbreak, that might not be easy.

Tomato growers are worried by memories of the spinach industry's experience after an *E. Coli* outbreak in September 2006. Once spinach was restored to markets, demand for bagged spinach returned at first to about half. Today, overall spinach consumption still isn't where it was.

The wait is painful for Florida tomato growers, the engine of a \$500 million industry that produces more fresh-market tomatoes than any other state.

"Until they come out and say, 'Here are our findings,' you're going to have a big cloud hanging over the tomato industry," said Tony DiMare of DiMare Farms, whose family is one of the biggest tomato growers and packers in Florida and the country. "You're talking about potentially ruining industries, even if you're not associated with the outbreak. It's guilt by association."

That's why the Florida congressional delegation sent a letter Thursday urging the FDA to find the salmonella source and do a better job of informing the public about what's safe. "If consumer confidence is not restored quickly, the economic consequences could be severe," the delegation wrote.

One early estimate suggests the salmonella outbreak could bring a loss of more than \$500 million to the tomato industry nationally, affecting growers, packers, distributors, retailers and their workers.

"We may very well end up with an industry that's significantly smaller," said Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, a cooperative representing more than 90 percent of the state's growers.

Florida tomato growers say that while they brought operations back toward normal this week, demand is not anywhere near normal.

"Once you lose momentum, you're not going to get it back overnight," said Jim Grainger, co-owner of Taylor & Fulton in Palmetto, who estimates he's moving one-fourth of his normal volume. "It's a dogfight."

Early indications are that customers remain confused, partly because of highly detailed FDA warnings.

"If you're an average consumer, you can't remember: Did they say a grape tomato is safe or not?" said Sarah Klein, attorney for the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "You decide, I'll just skip tomatoes completely."

The salmonella warning never spread to grape tomatoes, cherry tomatoes or tomatoes on the vine. The FDA warning tells consumers to avoid raw red round, red plum and red Roma tomatoes, unless they were grown in an area not associated with an outbreak. At least 45 states or countries now grow tomatoes deemed "safe to eat."

The key tomato regions still considered at risk: Mexico and Florida areas like Immokalee and Homestead, which are past their growing season. The 19 Florida counties declared safe are the only ones still producing tomatoes, and even that production is winding down. Any tomatoes from Immokalee or Homestead are long gone.

It doesn't help that on Thursday the number of people identified with salmonella saintpaul rose to 228 in 23 states, including the first case in Florida.

Even McDonald's is not yet willing to put tomatoes back on the Big N' Tasty burger or any sandwiches. Burger King is just getting its first tomatoes at Florida restaurants on Saturday.

Publix is putting up signs above its tomatoes stating, "Food safety is our top priority at Publix. We only provide our customers with tomatoes that are from growing areas approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration."

"We've had more questions and we've noticed some customer reservation," said Kim Jaeger, a South Florida spokeswoman for Publix. "The biggest reservation is that customers aren't sure where the tomatoes are coming from. We assure them that they're from the safe states."

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is offering all growers, distributors and retailers access to "Fresh from Florida" labels. The goal is to provide reassurance to consumers that the product came from a safe area. The state has also certified four million 25-pound cartons to verify that they were harvested in one of the approved counties after May 1.

That's enough for Hanna Martinez of Hollywood. "I believe tomatoes from Florida are fine, especially if it's at Publix," said Martinez, 43.

Industry experts predict tomatoes will rebound faster than spinach because of better sanitation procedures. Also, there's no easy substitute for consumers' tomatoes like there is for spinach.

"If you have a sandwich and you want a tomato on it, a cucumber isn't going to work instead," said Jim Prevor, editor of Produce Business magazine.

Florida growers could be worse off: Their tomato harvesting will wind down by early July. Growing season is already shifting northward.

By the fall, Florida growers hope the salmonella scare problems will be just a memory.

"If we didn't forget the cause of every foodborne disease," said Doug Archer, associate dean for research at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, "then no one would be eating much of anything."