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FOOD SAFETY

Farmers, lawmakers criticize salmonella response

Witnesses told Congress about the financial fallout from a food scare.

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WASHINGTON --

Turf struggles, bad communication and weak leadership undermined the federal response to a recent salmonella outbreak that cost the tomato industry a bundle, witnesses told a House of Representatives subcommittee Thursday.

Lawmakers joined farmers in a wholesale attack on the Food and Drug Administration's performance, potentially laying the political foundation for a regulatory overhaul and multimillion-dollar compensation package.

"We have been the primary injured party," Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, told the House panel, "and we look forward to Congress addressing that in the future."

Farmers say that the FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention erred in indicating that the salmonella outbreak was associated with tomatoes. State regulators testified that the FDA shared information reluctantly, while produce industry representatives complained that no one seemed to be in charge.

"We've noticed tensions [and] rivalries" among federal food-safety agencies, United Fresh Produce Association President Thomas E. Stenzel told the House Energy and Commerce Committee's oversight and investigations panel.

Federal food-safety officials still decline to exonerate tomatoes, although they say that fresh tomatoes currently on the market are safe. FDA Assistant Commissioner David Acheson stressed Thursday that the initial reported illnesses were "statistically linked to consumption of raw tomatoes," although no tainted tomatoes were found.

More than 1,300 U.S. residents have been sickened by the salmonella Saintpaul strain in the past three months. At least 252 people have been hospitalized in 43 states, and two have died.

Committee members asserted that the pattern of illnesses and shipping patterns of Florida tomatoes should have made it clear to government agencies that Florida tomatoes weren't the cause.

Florida tomatoes are distributed within the state and along the East Coast. In the early stages of the outbreak there weren't any people in Florida who had contracted salmonella Saintpaul. At last count there were only four ill people from Florida.

"If they were Florida tomatoes, don't you think you would have had some sick people in Florida?" Rep. Bart Stupak, R-Mich, the subcommittee's chairman asked government officials from the CDC and FDA.

The uproar isn't over the fact that people got sick from salmonella, a group of bacteria commonly found in animal intestines. Rather, the current problem rose from the response of regulators.

The FDA warned consumers nationwide June 7 against three types of tomatoes thought to be possibly implicated in the outbreak. The agency lifted its warning July 17. Investigators subsequently have traced salmonella to jalapeño and serrano peppers grown on two Mexican ranches.

Legislators wanted to know why FDA still refused to exonerate tomatoes, particularly those from Florida.

"You've got to put the suspect at the scene of the crime," Stupak said. "I don't think you did a very good job."

The finger-pointing has been escalating nearly as fast as the damage estimates.

"From the very beginning, it was clear to us that FDA was not sharing important information with state regulators," Florida Agricultural Commissioner Charles Bronson testified.

Bronson urged the FDA to take advantage of Florida's inspectors and laboratories to get faster answers in the case of a future outbreak.

Brown suggested there should be some way for the industry to provide its services as consultants in an outbreak without compromising any confidentiality or security issues.

"We share the same interest in preparing the safest tomatoes possible for consumers," Brown testified.

Last week, eight Florida lawmakers introduced a bill authorizing \$100 million in compensation for growers and others who lost business as a result of the FDA's consumer warnings. Stenzel put the losses at about \$200 million. Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Calif., suggested this week that the cost could exceed \$300 million.

Brown and his counterpart Ed Beckman of the Fresno-based California Tomato Farmers said contamination tracking would be speedier if all states used the same stringent traceability standards as Florida and California. In a recent test, investigators needed only 35 minutes to trace a tomato from a Sacramento Jack in the Box restaurant to the California farm.

While Acheson acknowledged that the speed of trace-back could be improved, he believes the focus needs to be on tighter controls at the farm level.

"The key answer to this is not reacting faster," Acheson said, "but to prevent the problems in the first place."