

3-27-2008

Us Ban On Honduran Melons Unjustified And Premature, Says President Zelaya

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Us Ban On Honduran Melons Unjustified And Premature, Says President Zelaya." (2008).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9593>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Us Ban On Honduran Melons Unjustified And Premature, Says President Zelaya

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduras

Published: 2008-03-27

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued an alert on cantaloupe from Honduras March 22. Distributors and sellers in the US were advised to remove from stock any cantaloupes from the exporter Agropecuaria Montelibano. Consumers were advised to inquire at stores whether cantaloupes on sale had come from Honduras. The warning came after 50 or more people had gotten sick with symptoms of food-borne salmonella infection in 16 US states and nine had gotten sick in Canada. The FDA said it took the step while continuing to investigate the outbreak.

In Honduras, President Manuel Zelaya took this to mean the measure was taken prior to establishing the facts of the case. Zelaya responded quickly to notice of the alert, telling reporters, "It is unjust to have declared a red alert without having laboratory proof but with just a simple supposition." He said that the salmonella had not been tied definitively to Honduran melons and that other Central American countries also export the product to the US. While the FDA was specific in identifying the Agropecuaria Montelibano melons as the culprits, Zelaya remained unconvinced. It was "strange" he said, that "all of a sudden," a company with a 30-year record of export to the US and a 20-year record of sales to Europe finds its exports suspended. To make his case, with CNN cameras rolling for all the world to see, he said, "Here I have a box of melons that we are exporting to the United States; here are the protective bags." Whereupon he extracted a single cantaloupe, produced a knife and fork, and continued, "Permit me to make a demonstration." He cut off a piece, put it in his mouth, and as if his mother never taught him better, said with mouth full, "I eat this fruit without any fear. It's a delicious fruit. Nothing happens to me." That was March 25. There have been no subsequent reports of the president having taken ill.

Agriculture Minister Hector Hernandez said four other Honduran companies export melons, but none of those were cited or affected by the ban. Hernandez agreed with Zelaya and said, "We will prove by laboratory tests that Honduras does not have this bacteria." Of 58 recent cases of salmonella infection in the US, he said, only two had eaten melons from Honduras. "In this government we have not had any problem. We are fearful because we believe and are almost certain that it is not Honduran melon." Both Zelaya and the company were so certain of their position they sent a delegation to Washington to meet with FDA officials. Hernandez said technicians from the Servicio Nacional de Sanidad Agropecuaria (Sanasa) had been sent to the company's fields in the south of Honduras to investigate. Zelaya was angry at the press for having published the story, calling the media an "enemy of Honduras." He also complained the story had been on international TV and on the Internet.

For each of the last three years, melon exports have brought the struggling country US\$35 million. Rare bacteria The Hondurans are certain of their position because the organism in the outbreak is Salmonella Litchfield, a rare strain. Their anger in part rests on the nonspecific way in which the issue is being handled in the US, where the interest is centered on minimizing the numbers of cases

of disease, called salmonellosis. But some degree of sensitivity was seen in the way US officials handled the issue. The offending melons were identified by brand, which is also known in the US as Agrolibano.

In Oregon, where several cases have been reported, epidemiologist William Keene told the public, "If you have any of this kind of cantaloupe at home, we recommend that you throw it out." But he also counseled, "If your cantaloupe has a sticker that says Guatemala or some other country, then it is not associated with this outbreak. If you can't tell where it came from, or if it came from Honduras, you could check with the store to see if it might come from this company." He explained, "It is confusing, but unfortunately there isn't any magic wand we can wave to tell which cantaloupe came from which field. If you're concerned about fruit that you have at home, the simplest thing to do is just toss it." Keene said there was cooperation between the FDA and the growers to try to pinpoint the source of the contamination, but it could take months and, in the meantime, "In our state only five cases have been confirmed so far, but we estimate for every confirmed case, there are 25 or more other people who became ill."

No one is known to have died from this outbreak. Keene said the symptoms of diarrhea, fever, cramping, and vomiting typically last less than a week, but some people babies, the elderly, and immunodeficient individuals could experience more severe effects. Antibiotics are of no use and can be counterproductive because they can prolong excretion of the organism, increasing person-to-person spread. Painful losses At Agropecuaria Montelibano, the issue is the economic loss. "This is a terrible decision for us," said operations manager Edilberto Rodriguez. "Because of this we have decided to develop new markets in Britain and Holland." He claimed losses of US\$8 million so far, with about 320,000 crates of melons rotting in US ports. Because of the FDA's lack of verification of the source, he and Honduran Trade Minister Fredys Cerrato are demanding compensation from the US government because there is no proof that the infected fruit was from Honduras.

The losses are only a part of the economic fallout in Honduras. Half the melon producers in the country have halted operations, and more than 1,500 workers have been fired. Five days after the FDA alert was issued, the industry declared itself in crisis. Their certainty of innocence is unshaken. "We have all the risk reduction certification processes, and we are strict in minimizing the risks, and we are sure the possibility is null," said Marcos Chavez of Agrolibano. The company's personnel manager Eduardo Piola added, "Fifty-five hundred seasonal workers depend on us. At this moment, just with this erroneous insinuation, we have 1,500 people stopped in the fields and 350 in the packing plant." No other country that imports Honduran melons has reported salmonella outbreaks, and none has restricted shipments. The 16 US states that have reported illness are Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin.

-- End --