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Mexican Growers Propose Voluntary Food Safety Guidelines

by LADB Staff

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Mexican fruit and vegetable growers are considering a plan to implement voluntary health-food safety guidelines proposed by the US government to prove their produce is safe to consume. Concerns about food safety emerged following an outbreak of hepatitis A contracted by school children in Michigan after eating imported strawberries in April 1997. The strawberries, which originated in Baja California state, were labeled as a California product. As a result, some US legislators proposed legislation to seek tighter labeling guidelines and closer monitoring of fruit imports (see SourceMex, 04/09/97).

The outbreak of hepatitis A also led to US government proposals for food safety guidelines, which were presented in April of this year. The guidelines call for common-sense practices such as requiring agricultural workers to wash their hands regularly and ensure that field- and food-processing equipment is kept clean. Representatives from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reassured Mexican growers that the guidelines will not be used to impose restrictions on imports of Mexican produce. But some grower organizations expressed concern that the US government could impose even tighter guidelines for imports of Mexican fruits and vegetables if another health outbreak occurs.

At a hearing sponsored jointly by the state governments of Sonora and Arizona in mid-April, 400 growers from western Mexican states met in the city of Hermosillo to examine the voluntary guidelines proposed by US President Bill Clinton's administration in April. Some growers offered to follow the proposed guidelines on a voluntary basis. "We need to respond to our customers," Sonora grower Rodolfo Zaragoza told the New York Times. "The changes are necessary to address the worries of the US consumers." Sonora and Sinaloa states produce 65% of the winter fruits and vegetables sold in US supermarkets.

Mexican poultry producers seek access to US market

Health concerns and labeling have become concerns in other instances of US-Mexican agricultural trade. In late April, representatives from Union Nacional de Avicultores (UNA) said they would continue to urge President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to pressure the US to lift a ban on imports of Mexican chicken. UNA president Florentino Alonso Hidalgo said the US government has maintained restrictions on poultry from Sonora and Sinaloa, even though the two states have been certified as free of avian flu and salmonellosis. Because of the US restrictions on Mexican poultry, some companies like Sigma Alimentos have been forced to import US- slaughtered chickens to process and then export the products to the US market (see SourceMex, 03/11/98).

In another NAFTA-related agricultural dispute, Mexican honey producers have joined the protest against relatively inexpensive imports of US high-fructose corn syrup. Guillermo Garcia y de los Rios, president of the Union Nacional de Envasadores de Miel (UNEM), said some independent

food processors in Mexico are selling honey diluted with imported corn syrup, which they can obtain at a relatively low cost. Garcia said roughly 60% of the honey sold in Mexico contains high levels of corn syrup. While Garcia said he supports restrictions on corn syrup imports, he said the problem could be best addressed if the government develops labeling requirements for honey. (Sources: The Journal of Commerce, 01/05/98; The New York Times, 04/16/98; Notimex, 04/15/98, 04/30/98; El Economista, 05/04/98)

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