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Mexican agriculture exporters could have an increasingly difficult time shipping their products to the US because of negative publicity surrounding an outbreak of hepatitis in four US states in recent weeks and a new bioterrorism law enacted by US President George W. Bush's administration in mid-December.

The outbreak of hepatitis A was most severe in western Pennsylvania, where more than 600 people were confirmed to have been infected after consuming green onions at a local restaurant. Similar cases were reported in Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina, although fewer people were affected.

US officials concluded that green onions imported from Mexico were contaminated with the hepatitis virus somewhere in the growing, packaging, or delivery process. Hepatitis A attacks the liver and can cause fever, nausea, diarrhea, jaundice, fatigue, abdominal pain, and loss of appetite.

The negative publicity is reminiscent of a similar case in 1997, when strawberries imported from Mexico were blamed for an outbreak of hepatitis among school children in Michigan (see SourceMex, 1997-04-09 and 1998-05-08). The green onions were reported to have been shipped from Baja California state, although there was no conclusive proof of their origin. One region under close scrutiny was the Mexicali Valley, which cultivates more than 6,300 hectares of green onions with an estimated commercial value of US$44 million, according to the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA).

The hepatitis reports led many US food distributors to cancel or postpone orders and prompted Mexican federal authorities, with the assistance of US experts, to launch a more comprehensive investigation of companies that produce and export green onions to the US market. The investigative team, which included inspectors from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), examined four Baja California companies in particular.

"This preventative action led US authorities to forego a total embargo on imports of green onions, thus allowing 22 of the 26 Mexican exporters to continue shipments to that country," SAGARPA said in a statement.

Authorities cite Baja California company

FDA and SAGARPA officials said the investigation did find that Mexicali-based company Dos M Sales de Mexico was using improper hygiene methods. The company had apparently been washing its scallions with water from a nearby reservoir, rather than with purified drinking water, as required by law. "The deficiencies were found at the company's packing operation but that is not
conclusive proof that this was the origin of the hepatitis outbreak in the United States," said Javier Trujillo, SAGARPA's deputy secretary for food safety and quality.

Still, Trujillo criticized the FDA for naming the suspected companies before completing an investigation that followed the green onions through the supply chain. "The hypothesis that the outbreak could have originated in Mexico is one, but there is also the likelihood of contamination in the transportation or at the restaurant," Trujillo said. "It's really surprising that the FDA would only emphasize the hypothesis of contamination at the point of origin."

FDA officials acknowledged the investigation was difficult because no reliable methods exist to find the virus in green-onion samples collected in the field. Instead, health inspectors analyzed the hepatitis A viruses in infected consumers and found they were virtually identical to those found in residents who live along the US-Mexican border. The investigation put Baja California state officials and producers on the defensive. "This shouldn't be used to blame Mexican producers for a health problem that could very well have been generated in [the US]," said Baja California's state agriculture secretary Juan Pablo Hernandez.

Bernardo Martinez, Baja California's interior secretary, noted that health authorities frequently conduct inspections of farms and packing operations in Mexicali and Ensenada and have found no physical evidence of hepatitis infection. Some producers say every effort is made to ensure that the highest level of hygiene is employed in the production, packaging, and shipping process. "We don't have the most sophisticated equipment in the world," said local producer Salvador Navarro. "But we take a lot of care with hygiene."

The vegetable- and fruit-producing states in western Mexico, including Baja California, Sonora, and Sinaloa, could suffer economically if the hepatitis concerns continue. Mexico's agricultural exports to the US have averaged about US$7.5 billion annually, with fresh fruits and vegetables accounting for US$2.5 billion of the total.

**Bioterrorism law goes into effect in December**

Mexican agriculture exporters are also contending with a new set of restrictive conditions due to take effect on Dec. 12 as part of the Public Health, Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act, also known as the anti-bioterrorism law.

The law requires Mexican exporters to file extensive paperwork to allow US authorities to closely monitor the content and origin of their products. US inspectors would have the right to delay entry of any product that did not carry the proper documents or was of suspicious origin. Manuel Munoz Martinez, president of the Asociacion Nacional de Importadores y Exportadores (ANIE), said the restrictions and delays could result in substantial losses for Mexican agricultural producers, exporters, and truckers involved in shipping perishable goods to the US, especially the small and medium-sized operations.

"[These companies] would have to absorb the costs of expired merchandise," Munoz said. Several government ministries including SAGARPA, the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB), and the Secretaria de Salud (SSA) are working with Mexican exporters to prepare them to comply with the
new law. Also, US authorities have agreed to allow some exceptions for two years after the law goes into effect.

Still, Mexican government officials and exporters are concerned that the new law could provide another tool for the US government to create nontariff barriers on imports of Mexican produce. "The fear is not unfounded. We have seen this happen before," said SAGARPA's Javier Trujillo, in reference to US restrictions on Mexican strawberries in 1997 and Chilean grapes in 1993 (see NotiSur, 1993-08-05). [Sources: El Financiero, 11/11/03; Dow Jones news service, 11/24/03; Milenio Diario, 11/25/03; El Sol de Mexico, 11/11/03, 12/01/03; The San Diego Union-Tribune, 12/02/03; Associated Press, 11/19/03, 11/26/03, 12/02/03, 12/04/03; La Jornada, El Universal, 12/05/03; La Cronica de Hoy, 12/05/03, 12/09/03; Reuters, 12/09/03; The Herald, 11/25/03, 12/01-3/03, 12/05/03, 12/08/03, 12/10/03]

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