7-30-2008

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Chile Growers Reeling After U.S. Links Salmonella Outbreak to Mexican Jalapenos

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2008-07-30

The US government dealt another blow to the Mexican agriculture industry by declaring that the source of a recent outbreak of salmonella in the US was caused by contaminated jalapeno peppers imported from Mexico. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had said earlier that the salmonella was probably carried by tomatoes imported from Mexico but did not have sufficient proof to confirm this theory. As a result, Mexican tomato growers lost about US$100 million.

In mid-July, the FDA said salmonella contamination came from jalapenos imported from Nuevo Leon state and recommended that US consumers avoid any of these peppers. This determination could result in loses of another several million dollars for Mexican growers.

In early July, as the FDA was beginning to rule out tomatoes as the cause of the salmonella outbreak, the agency said it suspected that contaminated jalapeno and serrano peppers and cilantro imported from Mexico may have caused the illness in the US. A few weeks later, the FDA announced that a jalapeno sample that originated at a farm in Nuevo Leon state showed signs of contamination. The pepper was part of a shipment distributed in the US by Agricola Zaragoza of McAllen, Texas, said David Acheson, the FDA's associate commissioner for foods. As was the case with the statement on tomatoes in June (see SourceMex, 2008-06-18), the FDA did not impose an embargo on imports of chile peppers.

Instead, the agency issued several recommendations urging US consumers to avoid jalapeno and serrano peppers from Mexico. FDA officials said it was up to US consumers to ascertain the origin of the peppers. "You're going to have to ask the person you're buying it from," said Acheson, who advised restaurants and grocery stores to know their suppliers and pass that information to customers.

The FDA was careful to emphasize that its declaration was specific to fresh chile peppers imported from Mexico and not those produced in the US. Producers in US states like Texas, New Mexico, and Georgia were just beginning their harvests at the time of the FDA declaration.

Jalapeno exports at risk

The FDA determination could cause significant economic damage to Mexico's 2 billion peso (US$199 million) jalapeno-pepper industry. Mexico's chile-pepper industry is valued at between 4.5 billion pesos (US$449 million) and 5 billion pesos (US$498 million). About 117,000 hectares are planted with chile peppers in Mexico, resulting in an annual production of 1.5 million tons, said the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA).

Because of strong demand for its chile peppers, Mexico has been increasing production in recent years. In 2007, Mexico earned about US$347 million from exports of chile peppers to the US. "Chiles
are so important to Mexico that, in the past decade, output has increased by 6.8% annually," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal, which noted that Mexico's chile exports to all its customers have now surpassed 400,000 tons annually, with the value estimated at US$500 million. Roughly half of the country's chile production, about 720,000 tons, is jalapenos. Mexico asks for scientific evidence Mexican officials and producers strongly protested the FDA declarations.

In early July, after the FDA first fingered Mexican chile peppers as a possible source of contamination, along with cilantro, avocados, and other produce, SAGARPA asked the agency to be more prudent in its statements regarding any salmonella theories that involved Mexico. "In the spirit of cooperation, we urge the FDA to abstain from making any public comments linking Mexican products to the outbreak until it has completed its investigation of Mexican jalapenos and until the methodology and complete results have been shared with appropriate Mexican authorities," said the agency.

In mid-July, the FDA revealed that the contamination was found in a batch of jalapenos from a farm in Nuevo Leon state. That state produces only a fraction of the jalapenos grown in Mexico, but the FDA warning was extended to all jalapenos originating in that country. Mexico's leading jalapeno producer is Chihuahua, which accounts for 43% of the total output each year, followed by Sinaloa, Michoacan, Jalisco, and Tamaulipas states.

The FDA's latest declaration drew a strong reaction from Mexican officials. Agriculture Secretary Alberto Cardenas accused the US of using the salmonella outbreak to engage in unfair trade practices. He raised the possibility that the contamination might have occurred when the produce was being handled in the US because the strain of salmonella in question has not been present in Mexico. "It was a gringo germ, not a Mexican germ, that was detected," Cardenas said during a tour of La Costena's food-processing plant in Morelos state. La Costena is one of Mexico's leading exporters of canned food, including jalapenos, salsas, and similar products, to the US.

Cardenas pointed out that Mexico has a stringent sanitary food-inspection system, which minimizes the chance of food contamination. As was the case with the recent reported tomato outbreak, Mexican officials said there were no reported cases of salmonella in Mexico related to the consumption of jalapenos. "We worked hard to prove that our tomatoes were not contaminated and in the end we were vindicated," said Cardenas.

**US accused of unfair trade practices**

The Mexican agriculture secretary suggested that the salmonella-related restrictions benefit the large agricultural interests in the US, which have been trying to keep Mexican produce out of the US market. Mexican agricultural exports to the US totaled US$15 billion in 2007 and were projected to approach US$17 billion in 2008.

Other SAGARPA officials said Mexico is working very closely with the US government to ensure that the two countries agree on uniform scientific methods to investigate salmonella outbreaks. "The Mexican government awaits scientific evidence from US health authorities to support any public declarations [related to Mexican produce]," SAGARPA said in a prepared statement.
Enrique Cruz, director of SAGARPA's Servicio Nacional de Sanidad, Inocuidad y Calidad Alimentaria (SENASICA), said he did not want to downplay the seriousness of the salmonella outbreak in the US but said solutions should be reached cooperatively. "We want to avoid a situation where Mexico is used as an excuse [to halt imports]," said the SENASICA official.

Sen. Heladio Ramirez Lopez, director of the Confederacion Nacional Campesina (CNC), was less diplomatic, lashing out at the US for employing protectionist policies. "I am not surprised by the recent US actions regarding tomatoes and chile peppers," said Ramirez, a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "Powerful countries like to set the rules for international trade and then twist them to their benefit."

Ramirez called on President Felipe Calderon's administration to adopt stricter inspection procedures against the US, which exported about US$60 million in agricultural products to Mexico in 2007. On occasion, Mexico has suspended imports of US products because of health-related concerns. This was the case in June, when imports of chicken products from Arkansas were halted because of an outbreak of avian flu in that state (see SourceMex, 2008-07-02).

Other industry officials also accused the US of imposing the restrictions to protect its own producers. "We suspect that the alerts placed on tomatoes and chiles were protectionist measures to help US growers who are just beginning their harvests," said Manuel Tarriba, president of the Confederacion de Asociaciones Agricolas del Estado de Sinaloa (CAAES). "The US government is doing its job in investigating the outbreak but also issues recommendations on products that may not even be responsible for the salmonella," added Tarriba. "This is causing significant damage to our industry."

FDA clears Mexican tomatoes In mid-July, the FDA informed Mexico that it had cleared tomatoes produced in Sinaloa and Jalisco. "With this decision, all 31 states and the Federal District are in compliance with US sanitary regulations and are free to export tomatoes to the US," said SAGARPA.

Torriba said the FDA decision came too late for Mexican producers, who stand to lose about US$100 million. "It will take a long time for consumers to regain confidence in our product," he said. The FDA's inability to pinpoint the problem earlier exposed flaws in the US inspection system, critics said. "After weeks of trying to get to the bottom of the outbreak, it occurred to investigators in late June that they had to look beyond fresh tomatoes," said The Wall Street Journal. "In at least two large clusters of illnesses, tomatoes weren't a factor, and cases kept piling up after the government had warned consumers to avoid eating fresh tomatoes." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on July 30, 2008, reported at 10.02 pesos per US$1.00]