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U.S. Lifts Salmonella Warnings; Border Governors Discuss Guidelines

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In late August, US health authorities withdrew their warning to US consumers to avoid eating certain chile peppers imported from Mexico, effectively ending a de facto embargo on jalapeno and serrano peppers from Mexico. The warnings against consuming chile peppers were issued in July (see SourceMex, 2008-07-30), after the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) determined that tomatoes were not the cause of a salmonella outbreak that caused as many as 1,440 people in the US to fall ill during several weeks (see SourceMex, 2008-06-18).

While US health authorities did not impose any formal restrictions, the warnings had the effect of halting imports of those products from Mexico. The decision by US health authorities to extend the warnings to all imports from Mexico brought protests from Mexican officials. Participants at the agriculture worktable at the XXVI Border Governors Conference in Hollywood, California, in mid-August, also discussed the issue. The warning on all Mexican jalapeno and serrano peppers in July came after a sample imported from Nuevo Leon was found to be contaminated with salmonella. The decision affected exports from Chihuahua state, Mexico's largest jalapeno producer.

In making their recent decision to lift the warning, the FDA and the CDC said discovery of the contaminated sample from Nuevo Leon did not mean that the state had actually been the source of the salmonella outbreak. The two agencies noted that the source might never be known, partly because of shortcomings in the US food-safety system. The warnings were lifted because no new cases of salmonella have been reported for some time.

Border agriculture officials working on uniform guidelines

One proposal discussed at the agriculture worktable was to create a set of guidelines and procedures that would allow US health authorities to apply more targeted warnings to specific zones rather than applying them across the board. "The state of Tamaulipas does not produce the same variety of tomatoes as Baja California, nor does Sinaloa produce the same tomatoes as we do in our state," Antonio Rodriguez Hernandez, director of economic development for Baja California state, said in an interview with Latin America Data Base (LADB).

Rodriguez noted that the US immediately lifted its warning on tomatoes from Baja California after determining that produce from that state was not yet ripe at the time of the salmonella outbreak. "It is important that a quarantine be targeted to a specific zone and not extended to other states that do not have a problem and that are already working on implementing good agricultural health practices," said Rodriguez.

The Baja California agriculture official said he disagreed with a proposal from several agricultural groups that Mexico impose retaliatory actions against the US. The Confederacion Nacional
Campesina (CNC) and other organizations called on President Felipe Calderon's administration to impose restrictions on all imports of US chicken when an outbreak of avian flu was discovered in Arkansas. Mexico limited the quarantine to that state (see SourceMex, 2008-07-02).

"I do not think that it would be effective to close our borders to all chicken from the US," said Rodriguez. "If we know where the problem lies, that's where the restrictions should apply." The official said the proposal developed by the agriculture worktable would be presented to federal authorities once completed. "We are still working on this plan, we are certain to have revisions," said Rodriguez.

The governors from the 10 border states have formed a working group to present a more coordinated position on key issues to the federal governments of the two countries (see SourceMex, 2008-08-27). This new relationship could prove fruitful in the efforts to convince US health authorities to adopt a more flexible position. Baja California Gov. Jose Guadalupe Osuna Millan, the only chief executive from the 10 states to mention agricultural health during the closing plenary session, called for uniform guidelines to prevent future disputes.

"We urge the federal governments of the two countries to develop a new binational protocol," said Osuna. "The Mexican border states are working hard to safeguard the health of all consumers and to guarantee that food produced in Mexico is as safe as that produced in the US."

The only other mention of agricultural health in the plenary sessions came from US Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who said in a vague statement, "As part of our security and prosperity partnership we've also made important progress in economic competitiveness in North America, ensuring that food and other products across the border are safe." This article was supplemented with information from Associated Press, 08/28/08, and Reuters, 08/28/08.

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