

9-7-2011

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Carlos Navarro

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Salmonella Outbreak Linked to Imports of Mexican Papayas." (2011). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5824>

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Salmonella Outbreak Linked to Imports of Mexican Papayas

by *Carlos Navarro*

Category/Department: Agriculture and Fish

Published: Wednesday, September 7, 2011

On several occasions in the past two decades, produce imported from Mexico has been linked to salmonella and hepatitis A outbreaks, prompting the US government to impose sanitary controls ranging from a temporary ban to a warning and tighter inspections. Since 1998, the US has imposed restrictions on imports of green onions, strawberries, melons, tomatoes, and jalapeño peppers. These restrictions were always lifted after the US government was satisfied that Mexican producers had taken the necessary steps to eliminate the source of contamination.

The latest Mexican product to face restrictions is the papaya, which has been linked to 100 cases of salmonella poisoning in 23 US states in 2011. In late August, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) imposed strict guidelines on Mexican papaya imports after a series of inspections between May 12 and Aug. 18 uncovered salmonella spp bacteria in 33 of 211 samples taken. FDA officials said the contaminated samples were found in papayas shipped under the Blondie, Yaya, Mañanita, and Tastylicious brands originating in southern and central Mexico.

US tightens inspections, requires health documentation

The US government did not, however, impose an outright ban on papayas, instead announcing tighter inspections at the border and a requirement that the 28 Mexican companies that ship the fruit to the US submit paperwork from certified laboratories that the produce is free of salmonella contamination. Any shipment lacking the paperwork would be banned from entering the US.

Mexico's Economy Minister Bruno Ferrari said President Felipe Calderón's administration was providing US authorities with all the assistance necessary to conduct the inspections. But he emphasized that authorities on both sides of the border were still trying to determine the cause of the salmonella contamination. "We are still in the investigation phase, and it's premature to make any determination at this point," the economy secretary said at the end of August.

Health experts from both countries are collaborating in the investigation. "I am confident that this joint effort will reduce the risk of contamination of produce moving across our common border," said Enrique Sánchez Cruz, director in chief of the government's agricultural health agency (Servicio Nacional de Sanidad, Inocuidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria, SENASICA).

Shortly after the FDA announced its new guidelines, the two organizations representing the papaya industry—the Comité Nacional Sistema Producto Papaya (PROPAPAYA) and the Consejo Nacional de Productores de Papaya (CNPP)—issued a statement reassuring producers and distributors that the US border remained open to the Mexican fruit. "The FDA alert indicates that that government agency will increase its inspections on all papaya containers originating in Mexico," PROPAPAYA and the CNPP said in a statement.

The two organizations pledged to work closely with SENASICA to take whatever actions were necessary to regain the confidence of consumers. "We offer a commitment to consumers in our country and overseas to strengthen the application of sanitary measures during production, harvest, packing, transport, and distribution of papayas," PROPAPAYA and the CNPP said.

The admission that there might be a problem is in sharp contrast to comments made just before the announcement of the FDA restrictions, when information leaked out about the salmonella cases in the US. "It is premature to single out Mexican papayas as the source of the salmonella outbreak in the US," Ramón Chavira Campos, president of the Confederación Nacional de Agrupaciones de Comerciantes de Centros de Abasto (CONACCA), said in late July.

Papaya prices plummet in Mexico

Even though papayas have not been banned outright, the restrictions have had some negative repercussions for producers in more than a dozen states in western, central, and southern Mexico. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) said four states—Jalisco, Colima, Chiapas, and Veracruz—account for nearly two-thirds of Mexican papaya exports to the US. Other major producing states are Quintana Roo, Yucatán, Michoacán, Oaxaca, Campeche, Sinaloa, Nayarit, Tabasco, and San Luis Potosí.

Papaya producers say the US restrictions have resulted in a sharp price decline in Mexico because many companies, unable to get a quick turnaround on their export shipments, are opting to sell their product at home. By some estimates, more than 83% of the 3,600 tons of papaya shipped to the US on a weekly basis has been dumped on the domestic market. Many producers are selling their product at 4 pesos (US\$0.32) per kg or less, compared with 8 pesos (US\$0.64) per kg previously.

"The domestic market is saturated, we have an oversupply of product," said Neftali Anaya Sánchez, director of Michoacán-based Papayas Anaya. "We traditionally allocate at least 50% of our production to the export market."

The US restrictions came at a time when papaya production was already in surplus in Mexico, and prices were beginning to drop earlier in the year. "Prices began falling in March because of the large supplies already present in the market," said Humberto Rodríguez Hernández, an agronomist at the Hidroponía Maya, an agricultural operation owned by the state of Quintana Roo.

"Before the FDA announced its restrictions, we were exporting an average of 180 shipments per week to the US," said Ramón Martínez, a producer in Tabasco. "But shipments have fallen sharply, and we estimate that about 3,000 tons have remained in the domestic market and that is one reason why prices have fallen."

But Rodríguez said the market began to tumble when fruit from a Chiapas-based company failed to pass inspection in McAllen, Texas, and other US entry points. "It was at that time that domestic supplies began to grow to their current surplus," said the Hidroponía Maya agronomist.

Many producers and distributors were also not taking chances even when they were confident that their shipments would pass inspection. "With the length of time needed to conduct an inspection, we run the risk of losing their shelf life," papaya producers in Chiapas said in an interview with T21.com.

Martínez said US authorities have cleared papayas from his operation in Tabasco, but he is still having difficulty shipping the product through McAllen. "We have now started shipping the fruit via Tijuana," he said.

The Mexican Congress has also become involved in the issue. Deputy Alberto Jiménez Merino, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), said the expenditures budget

(Presupuesto de Egresos de la Federación) for 2012 will provide funding to boost agriculture sanitation and inspection, particularly for products intended for export to the US. "In this coming budget, deputies—especially those affiliated with the Confederación Nacional Campesina—are going to seek allocations to strengthen agricultural and livestock health and sanitation so that we don't have to face these types of concerns," said Merino, in reference to the US restrictions on papayas.

Mexican Congress calls US move 'protectionist'

But Jiménez Merino also joined legislators from the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in criticizing the US for imposing the restrictions without offering proof that the contamination occurred in Mexico.

PAN Deputy Arturo Ramírez Bucio described the restrictions as a unilateral protectionist measure by the US government and suggested that the Calderón government review the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to determine if Mexico could take any actions to prevent further economic damage to Mexican agricultural producers. "Regrettably, Mexico always pays for the broken dishes," said Ramírez Bucio. "NAFTA should be more equitable and respectful."

PRD Deputy Avelino Méndez Rangel also called on the Calderón administration to take action. He suggested that Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA) take any appropriate actions to counter the "protectionist, alarmist, and unilateral" stance taken by the US.

The Mexican government and Congress have raised the same issue of protectionism during prior disputes with the US. In 2002, the US banned imports of Mexican cantaloupes following the discovery of salmonella in some imports. Mexico filed a complaint with the World Trade Organization (WTO) on the premise that the FDA failed to prove that Mexican melons were the cause of the salmonella outbreak ([SourceMex, Nov. 20, 2002](#)).

In 2008, the Calderón government threatened to file a complaint against the US through NAFTA following statements from US officials that Mexican tomatoes might be responsible for a salmonella outbreak in the US that year ([SourceMex, June 18, 2008](#)).

Authorities later discovered that the contamination came from another agricultural product: jalapeño peppers imported from Nuevo León state ([SourceMex, July 30, 2008](#)) and ([Sept. 3, 2008](#)). The erroneous assessment resulted in losses of about US\$100 million for Mexican tomato producers.

Mexican fruit and vegetable growers have also implemented voluntary health-safety guidelines after the discovery that their contaminated exports caused health emergencies in the US. This was the case in 1997, when strawberries imported from Mexico resulted in an outbreak of hepatitis A among school children in Michigan ([SourceMex, May 6, 1998](#)).

A separate health emergency occurred in 2003, when a widespread outbreak of hepatitis A in at least four US states was traced to imports of green onions from Baja California. At that time, the US government had just approved a new bioterrorism law, and there were strong concerns in Mexico that this would affect future shipments of produce to the US ([SourceMex, Dec. 10, 2003](#)). [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sept. 7, 2011, reported at 12.48 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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