

Cold Chain Problems? Who's Doing What to You and Your Produce?



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FDA bungled outbreak response, report says

By Andy Nelson

(Nov. 20, 12:04 p.m.) A new report analyzing the handling of the Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak this summer calls on the Food and Drug Administration to establish mandatory safety standards for fresh produce and criticizes the government for its poor communications in the wake of the outbreak.

The report also vindicates tomato shippers who claim the government focused too much attention on them, to disastrous economic effect.

Written by the Produce Safety Project, an initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts at Georgetown University, the report found that:

- The FDA already has the statutory authority to establish mandatory safety standards for produce, despite agency officials' statements to the contrary;
- Health agencies, which lacked a coordinated response to the outbreak, need organizational reforms; and
- Numerous, and ever-changing, public health messages during the outbreak show a need for unified risk communication plans.

Amy Philpott, vice president of communications for the Washington, D.C.-based United Fresh Produce Association, which announced its support for mandatory standards in January 2007, said the report gives the produce industry an effective tool for its food-safety-related efforts.

"To have a third party look at it is positive, and it provides the quantitative data to help us go forward," she said.

Samantha Winters, director of education and promotion for the Maitland-based Florida Tomato Committee, said the Produce Safety Project's work helps back up the committee's assertion that Florida tomatoes got a bum rap in the aftermath of the outbreak.

"The report supports what we've contended all along — that the FDA locked onto tomatoes and didn't consider other sources," Winters said.

Philpott also was pleased with the report's emphasis on the importance of the proper response to outbreaks.

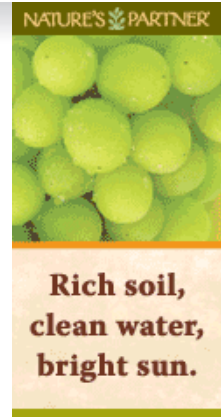
"There need to be clear lines of authority and transparency," she said.

That was not the case during the Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak, said Jim O'Hara, Produce Safety Project director and former FDA associate commissioner for public affairs and later deputy assistant secretary for Health and Human Services under President Clinton.

"What's critical is that there be a single unified voice, providing as much information as possible to make sure people are acting on facts, not suppositions or rumors," O'Hara said.

Instead, in the Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak, there were five agencies issuing different messages spread out over four days, he said.

That, he said, created hysteria.



"There was the impression that the outbreak was sweeping across the country instead of being localized," he said.

One of the study's main objectives is keeping a similar outbreak from happening, O'Hara said.

"It shows the need for putting in place preventive safety standards," he said.

To do that, he said the government has to step up to the plate.

"The FDA needs to exert its authority and put in place mandatory standards," he said.

"What we've heard from people in the industry is that the current patchwork quilt serves no one."

[E-mail Andy Nelson](#)

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