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## FOOD SAFETY

# Salmonella scare bungled, study finds

**An academic report shows how the government mishandled this year's salmonella outbreak -- needlessly costing tomato growers millions of dollars.**

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A lack of coordination and communication between government agencies over the handling of this year's salmonella outbreak may have unfairly kept the focus on tomatoes and caused unnecessary economic harm to the industry, according to a report being released Monday by the Produce Safety Project.

The project, an initiative of the nonpartisan Pew Charitable Trusts at Georgetown University, aims to spur changes in food safety policy and the public health system.

While the report stops short of vindicating the tomato industry, it points out several instances in which evidence pointed to other causes of the outbreak that federal officials didn't focus on early.

"There's a lot of information that raises question about the identification of tomatoes," said Jim O'Hara, director of the Produce Safety Project. "It seems clear that earlier than they did, public health officials should have said there were other food vehicles identified as a potential cause. They needed to be much more transparent."

The key is the federal government's delay in focusing the investigation on jalapeño and serrano peppers as the potential cause of the salmonella outbreak, which sickened more than 1,400 people.

The report suggests that questions should have been raised earlier about whether investigators were on the right track when the number of salmonella cases didn't drop dramatically after the Food and Drug Administration warned consumers nationally on June 7 to stop eating certain kinds of tomatoes. It wasn't until about June 24 that the number of cases dropped dramatically.

## OVERLOOKED PEPPERS

At the same time, Centers for Disease Control's reports in June show repeated evidence of data from two restaurants where people got ill in Texas that implicated salsa made

with tomatoes and jalapeños as a "likely source of illness." Other studies found links to Mexican food served at restaurants.

Yet, CDC questionnaires given to sick people included no questions about peppers. The media and consumer public also were never told that tomatoes from supermarkets were not believed to be a problem. The warning on tomato consumption wasn't lifted until July 17.

"The evidence suggested that peppers were missed early on," O'Hara said.

The FDA has acknowledged that it could increase the speed of its investigations but believes the focus should be on preventing problems at farms in the first place.

One problem with the latest salmonella investigation was a disconnect between information from the investigation and the epidemiology studies. The lack of coordination results in a "public-health response that was ineffective in protecting the public and caused significant unnecessary harm to the tomato industry," according to the Produce Safety Project report.

Ultimately, officials with the CDC and FDA found strong evidence to implicate jalapeño and serrano peppers in connection with the outbreak, but no conclusive findings. They still did not exonerate tomatoes from Florida or anywhere else.

While government officials kept the focus on tomatoes until lifting the ban on July 17, consumer demand plummeted both during the ban and after. The Florida tomato industry alone may have lost more than \$100 million.

The outbreak also had a dramatic impact on consumer confidence in fresh produce generally -- and particularly tomatoes. Consumer demand has been slow to come back. In recent months demand still was about 20 percent below pre-outbreak levels.

## **PRODUCE SALES HIT**

The Produce Safety Project found in a survey of 1,002 likely voters in July that 57 percent are worried about the safety of fresh produce and 60 percent believed government food safety agencies are doing only a fair or poor job.

The produce report points to three main areas for improvement:

- Preventive safety standards are needed for all fresh produce, similar to the program Florida tomato growers developed with state officials and began implementing in July.

While FDA officials acknowledge the need for these standards, they have said Congress needs to pass legislation to grant them the necessary authority. But the report asserts that FDA already has the authority -- and used it to enact standards for seafood in 1995 and juice in 2001.

- Better coordination is needed among public health agencies at the local, state and federal levels. Many of the problems in the salmonella outbreak were traced to a lack of

coordination between the FDA and CDC or between the CDC and the state and local health departments.

- During any outbreak, there's a need for more coordinated communication from all agencies involved. The report suggests that presentation of data included conflicting messages that led to confusion in the consumer public about what was safe to eat.

### **MAPS MISLED**

Maps from the CDC made it appear that the outbreak was spread over entire states, when often the impact was clustered in particular counties. The report blames the communication failures for decisions by restaurants and supermarkets to stop offering tomatoes.

Most of the problems surrounding food safety aren't new, but Pew Project leaders hope the new administration of president-elect Barack Obama will make them a priority for change.

"What we really need to do is look at the mistakes and learn from them," O'Hara said. "This isn't about pointing fingers. It's about how do we move forward."