



Consumer Federation of America

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Statement of CFA's Chris Waldrop on the Need for a Standardized Traceability System for Produce

Good morning. My name is Chris Waldrop. I am the director of the Food Policy Institute at the Consumer Federation of America. CFA is a nonprofit association of over 300 pro-consumer group representing 50 millions Americans that was founded in 1968 to promote the consumer interest through research, education and advocacy.

Almost two years ago, FDA was in the middle of a nationwide outbreak investigation of E. coli O157:H7 illnesses linked to fresh spinach. That outbreak ended up sickening almost 200 people in 26 states. Three persons died.

During that investigation, CFA, CSPI and other consumer groups urged Commissioner von Eschenbach to take proactive food safety measures in order to avert future outbreaks. We urged him to issue mandatory food safety regulations for fresh produce, instead of voluntary industry guidelines that FDA had issued in the past. We also urged him to establish a comprehensive traceability system capable of tracing food products from the farm to the table.

But FDA did nothing.

Now, almost two years later, the FDA is in the middle of another outbreak investigation. This time the FDA is tracking tomatoes possibly contaminated with Salmonella Saintpaul. More than 800 persons in 36 states have been sickened and 107 persons have been hospitalized. Thankfully no one has died.

FDA has been investigating this outbreak for over three weeks now and has been unable to determine the source of the contamination. Meanwhile consumers continue to get sick. The most recent illness was on June 20.

The FDA employees who are doing these investigations are working hard, day and night, to get to the bottom of this outbreak. But FDA officials have made their job much harder that it should be.

We've heard from FDA officials that tracing tomatoes through the food supply chain is a long and difficult process. Yet if FDA had put a traceability system in place two years ago following the spinach outbreak, this current investigation might be moving more

quickly. This latest outbreak demonstrates very clearly the need for the federal government to be able to quickly and easily trace an implicated food to its source.

This doesn't require reinventing the wheel. The technology for an effective traceback system already exists. In fact, some firms and industries are using traceback systems for their own products and business concerns. However, a scattered approach is insufficient.

The FDA must require a standardized system so that it can effectively and efficiently trace back contaminated food to the source. Consumers cannot afford to wait while FDA takes weeks to get to the bottom of an outbreak investigation. An effective comprehensive traceback system is critical to protecting the public health.

And while traceback is a critical element of a modern food safety system, **preventing** an outbreak from occurring, **preventing** consumers from getting sick, is even more vital.

In the almost two years since consumer groups urged the FDA Commissioner to take proactive food safety measures, FDA has done very little to **prevent** these types of outbreaks from occurring in the first place.

Like traceability, prevention is not a novel idea. It means that fruit and vegetable producers and processors need to proactively identify where contamination is likely to occur and take steps to prevent it. It's very simple.

This should be required of all producers and processors who wish to sell their products to the public. A voluntary or haphazard approach is insufficient. Even the produce industry recognizes the need for this type of mandatory food safety regulation. Yet the FDA has failed to require producers and processors to develop and implement written food safety plans.

We do not want to be standing here in another two years pleading with the FDA to take action. The FDA needs to develop a comprehensive traceability system and it needs to require producers and processors to develop written food safety plans. And it needs to do it now. More outbreaks should not occur, more consumers should not get sick, before FDA finally implements these critical food safety programs.

Thank you.

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