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FDA's alert on cantaloupes met by industry backlash

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After the Food & Drug Administration issued a March 22 alert that a Salmonella outbreak was possibly tied to cantaloupe from Honduras, the produce industry countered with a firestorm of protest from a variety of interests, including the president of Honduras.

According to the FDA, cantaloupe exported by Agropecuaria Montelibano, a melon grower and packer in San Lorenzo, Honduras, "based on current information ... appears to be associated with a Salmonella Litchfield outbreak in the United States and Canada." The March 22 alert "advises FDA field offices that all cantaloupes shipped to the United States by this company are to be detained."

As of March 22, the FDA had received reports of 50 illnesses in 16 states and nine illnesses in Canada linked to the consumption of cantaloupes. Miguel Molina, owner of Agropecuaria Montelibano, countered the FDA alert with a detailed letter to the trade on March 25.

According to Mr. Molina, he and his children, Miguel Molina Jr. and Jenny Molina, met March 24 with FDA officials in College Park, MD. Also present in the meeting were the Honduran ambassador to the United States, Honduras' minister of commerce and top leaders from Honduras' SENASA, the National Service of Farming Health. Participating via teleconference were staff members from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and the American Embassy in Honduras.

Attempts by The Produce News to reach members of the Molina family by phone were unsuccessful.

Mauro Suazo, president of the Central American Federation of Melon & Watermelon Exporters, told The Produce News March 26, "The economic and image damage to melons in general and to Agrolibano in particular will amount to millions of dollars. It is a shame that it happened to one of the most prestigious melon-producing companies in Honduras."

Mr. Suazo said that Agropecuaria Montelibano "has always observed rules and regulations as far as Good Agricultural Practices and Good Manufacturing Practices." He added that Mr. Molina took 1,500 pages of food-safety audits into his meeting with FDA.

In his letter to the trade, Mr. Molina indicated that FDA authorities "were very surprised of our operations and of the professionalism of our company's executives in presenting all evidence, certificates and microbiological analysis results to support our arguments during the meeting. The FDA [has not] been able to present a single positive Salmonella result and they only have two tracebacks as supportive evidence for their statement. The first goes back to a [fresh-cut fruit] processor in Washington state and the second case goes back to a buffet restaurant chain located in Salt Lake City."

On March 24, Agropecuaria Montelibano "received the first results from the FDA, which came out negative from a load in California," Mr. Molina said in his letter. "In addition, today we received three analyses with negative results from our main importer (Mack Multiples) in the [United Kingdom], which adds to the 149 negative analyses we had in our records."

Patricia Compres, owner of Customized Brokers Inc. in Miami, handles customs brokerage for a large amount of melons from Central America, including not only Agropecuaria Montelibano but also many of the major melon importers in North America.

Ms. Compres said that Mr. Molina "is one of the largest shippers" of Central American melons. The timing of this news comes "at the peak of the season. If Montelibano ships 30 cantaloupe containers weekly, it will hurt us tremendously."

Michael Warren, president of Central American Produce Inc., based in Pompano Beach, FL, said that his firm handles some melons exported by Agropecuaria Montelibano. "I'm eating one of [Agrolibano's] melons right now," he said. "I have been eating them for weeks. It is a great melon."

Mr. Warren's opinion was shared by Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, who was shown March 25 on CNN and Univision eating an Agrolibano cantaloupe. He told CNN, "It's not true what [FDA] is saying. Logically, we believe it is an error."

Mr. Warren first learned of FDA's move for a voluntary recall late on March 21. "This has all been done verbally to this point," he said, adding that the original word from FDA was a suggestion to pull the melons from shelves as the case was being investigated. By March 26, "FDA asked us to advise our customers that the product [from Agropecuaria Montelibano] should be destroyed now."

Mr. Warren said, "As far as I know from my last conversation with FDA, there has not been a positive test" connecting Montelibano's melons with Salmonella Litchfield.

On March 26, Central American Produce was shipping no melons exported by Agropecuaria Montelibano but other melon brands were being shipped, including Central American's own 'Mayan Pride' brand. "Demand is slow but people are taking melons," said Mr. Warren.

He sent Agrolibano melons from his warehouse to a lab to be tested for the presence of Salmonella and expected to receive those results after The Produce News' deadline for this issue. "Naturally, we are just hoping this thing blows over quickly. It's the prime time of the year for melons."

Mr. Warren said that his own firm as well as Agrolibano and "the rest of the shippers all take the

necessary precautions, and we believe ours is a safe food supply."

Mr. Molina said in his March 25 letter to the trade that his firm is not packing cantaloupes for the United States but is packing honeydews since they are grown, handled and packed by "separate, independent farms."

Agrolibano markets its product in North America through about 10 different sales companies.

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