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FDA applauds new public-private relationships

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Despite its devastating impact on the world, the coronavirus pandemic bore important lessons for society. But for the FDA, which specific lessons were learned?

This was among the questions answered by Frank Yiannas, Deputy Commissioner for Food Policy and Response for the U.S. Food & Drug Administration, who was the featured guest of a Sept. 24 United Fresh Produce Washington Congress virtual session titled “Partnership with FDA and the Fresh Produce Industry.” He engaged in a dialogue with Jennifer McEntire, United’s vice president of food safety and technology.

The pair credited FDA with establishing early in the pandemic that food was not a factor in spreading coronavirus. (Despite such a positive decision, uniformed social media posters liberally spread grossly flawed advice, such as suggesting the precaution of washing vegetables with bleach, McEntire noted.)

Independent misinformation aside, the FDA and other federal agencies could quickly move this spring because of countless, critically important public-private partnerships. “If we weren’t collaborating, things weren’t going to get done,” Yiannis said.

Such movement was “an unprecedented action,” McEntire added.

Among other strong and badly needed moves, the FDA revised labeling policies to allow unforeseeable changes to expedite new procedures in national food distribution.

Yiannis said the FDA tested the limits of its authority to make fast and needed policy revisions. The

agency received “very strong leadership from the top” to move quickly.

Daily, the FDA enjoyed a “new level of interacting with the private sector that had never been seen before.”

This required that both the FDA and private sector work “with a different level of trust” than had ever been in place. More frequent and more transparent action was in effect, he said. Otherwise, “there is no way we could have managed as successfully as we did as a nation.”

Yiannis discussed an independent FDA action this year, which also reflected unprecedented progress toward bringing safer food to the American public.

For years, Mexican papayas have consistently faced recalls in the U.S. market. To firmly extinguish the issue, this year the FDA cooperated very closely with leadership from the Texas International Produce Association, and, importantly, SENISICA – Mexico’s “FDA” – as well as Mexican grower-packer-shippers to stop the spread of foodborne illness related to papayas. The entire distribution system, including U.S. retailers, was involved in the discussion, Yiannis noted.

By this September, such problems seem to have disappeared, Yiannis and McEntire both acknowledged. But each somewhat cringed with this statement, as they figuratively reached to “knock wood.”

Another important FDA move this year is expected to be a very positive step forward in improving the effectiveness of food traceability.

FDA has produced a 199-page proposal on the topic, which was drafted in cooperation with six food organizations. Yiannis credited United Fresh for taking the lead among these groups.

Yiannis said this is an extension of the Food Safety Modernization Act, which passed in 2011. The new procedures will expedite FSMA’s effectiveness to improve traceability, which has been a frequent stumbling block for the produce industry.

Yiannis noted that no one has greater expertise on the food industry than the producers and processors of food. He encourages this segment not to underestimate their potential influence on national policy.

The federal government needs a bigger conversation on the food industry, Yiannis added.

He reminded food suppliers that they need to approach government representatives with a well-organized message that succinctly delivers key points to be absorbed by Washington leadership.

Photo: FDA’s relationship with the fresh produce industry was discussed Sept. 24 during a United Fresh Produce Washington Congress virtual session. United’s Jennifer McEntire, vice president of food safety and technology, led the conversation with Frank Yiannas, Deputy Commissioner for Food Policy and Response for the U.S. Food & Drug Administration.

