

## FDA seeks advice to improve tracking of produce

By KEVIN FREKING  
Associated Press Writer  
Oct 16, 5:12 PM EDT  
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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Prompted by this summer's salmonella outbreak, the government has begun investigating how to quickly identify the source of contaminated food and stop it from getting to consumers.

At the first public hearing on the issue Thursday, representatives from the produce industry cited progress toward labeling on every case of fruit and vegetables that would make it easier to trace tainted food from the dinner table back to the farm.

Consumer advocates want more: marking individual tomatoes, heads of lettuce and other produce from an industry subject to 900 safety recalls over the past two years.

"We need better information going to the consumer so he can identify fruits and vegetables when it's in his refrigerator and in his cabinet shelves," said David Plunkett, senior staff attorney at the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

The salmonella outbreak that sickened at least 1,440 people exposed flaws in the nation's food safety system. Government investigators found strong evidence to implicate jalapeno and serrano peppers, and a farm in Mexico, in the largest outbreak of foodborne illness in a decade. An earlier warning advised people against eating various kinds of tomatoes.

The Food and Drug Administration has asked companies and consumers to recommend ways to improve the tracing of produce throughout the distribution system. Agency officials said the large number of food recalls and food-borne illnesses of recent years is a sign that health officials are better at finding problems.

"We are going to see more of these (outbreaks) rather than fewer," said Stephen Sundlof, director of the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. "We just need to respond sooner when they do occur."

One of the questions the FDA is asking is whether an identifier should be assigned to fresh produce, and if so, at what stage in the supply chain. The industry agrees with that

concept, said Kathy Means of the Produce Marketing Association. She said it is in the industry's best interest to quickly track problems.

"They have every incentive to want to do this," Means said.

Means said each container of produce should contain a label with a bar code that would allow businesses and the FDA to immediately identify the owner of that product - from manufacturers to packers to retailers. She said individual companies have their own system for tracking products, but the system is not uniform. She also urged the agency to let the industry enact its plan rather than seek new federal rules. Some companies are ready to put in place the barcode system immediately while others have a long way to go.

"This is going to be hundreds of millions of dollars over a few years," she said.

Some legal underpinnings for a national tracing system are in place.

A federal bioterrorism law requires food to be traced one step forward and one step back - who supplied it, and where it went - so that, in theory, regulators can follow the trail. Industry officials said they believed that law was sufficient to get companies to enact the kind of record keeping that would keep them in compliance with the law, but so far, they have heard of little enforcement by the government to ensure that companies were complying.

Sundlof said the law authorized the FDA to check whether businesses were complying only when health dangers had surfaced. He said on a few occasions this year when potential health problems were identified, the agency exercised its authority

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On the Net:

Food and Drug Administration: <http://www.fda.gov>

Produce Marketing Association: <http://www.pma.com/>

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