

Produce has few safeguards

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Associated Press

ALLENDE, Mexico — At the end of a dirt road in northern Mexico, the conveyor belts processing hundreds of tons of vegetables a year for U.S. and Mexican markets are open to the elements, protected only by a corrugated metal roof.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration suspects this packing plant, its warehouse in McAllen, Texas, and a farm in Mexico are among the sources of the United States' largest outbreak of foodborne illness in a decade, which infected at least 1,440 people with a rare form of salmonella.

A plant manager confirmed that workers handling chili peppers aren't required to separate them according to the sanitary conditions in which they were grown, offering a possible explanation for how such a rare strain of salmonella could have caused such a large outbreak.

The AP has found that while some Mexican producers grow fruits and vegetables under strict sanitary conditions for export to the U.S., many don't — and they can still send their produce across the border easily.

Neither the U.S. nor the Mexican governments impose any safety requirements on farms and processing plants. That includes those using unsanitary conditions — like those at Agricola Zaragoza — and brokers

or packing plants that mix export-grade fruits and vegetables with lower-quality produce.

In fact, the only thing a Mexican company needs to do to sell produce to the United States is to register online.

Some Mexican farms and processing plants have high standards of sanitation — and get private companies to certify those standards — so they can sell to U.S. supermarket chains that wouldn't buy from uncertified ones.

But there is no public list of the chains that require sanitary practices, meaning there's no way to know whether the fruit and vegetables in any particular store are certified or not.

The only U.S. government enforcement consists of 625 FDA inspectors who conduct spot checks of both U.S. and foreign produce, reviewing less than 1 percent of all imports. Beyond that, it is entirely up to the supermarkets and restaurants to police their produce.

The best Mexican producers grow crops in fenced-off fields, irrigate them with fresh water and pack them in spotless plants where workers dress in protective gear from head to toe. But there are still plenty of farms with unfenced fields where wildlife can roam freely, and use untreated water — sometimes laced with sewage.

Salmonella can lurk on the skin of produce or penetrate inside. Cooking kills it, but washing raw produce doesn't always eliminate it,

which is why safety experts stress preventing contamination.

Agricola Zaragoza is one of the uncertified plants, manager Emilio Garcia told the AP. He said the packing plant washes produce from both certified and uncertified producers, opening up the possibility for contamination. He refused to give details about his suppliers.

The FDA suspects Mexican jalapeno and serrano chilies processed at Agricola Zaragoza caused the latest outbreak, though it also thinks tomatoes could have played a role. It concedes the ultimate source may never be known.

Cesar Fragoso, president of Mexico's Chili Peppers Growers Association, said most Mexican pepper farms sell their crops to distributors without knowing what country they are bound for. Because of that, he said, few bother to get certification.

In addition, lots of produce passes from distributor to distributor before reaching its final destination, increasing the potential for contamination and making tracing outbreaks much more difficult. Former FDA official William Hubbard said only 10 percent of outbreaks are ever completely resolved.

"It is very common for distributors to receive products from numerous sources, numerous farms and in some cases multiple countries," Hubbard said. "That's just the way produce moves."