



June 17, 2008

Michael O. Leavitt  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Leavitt:

Nothing is more important to the produce industry than delivering to consumers the safest, healthiest and most nutritious fresh produce possible.

In recent weeks, our industry, public health officials in federal, state and local government, and consumers have all been grappling with a complex and complicated outbreak of Salmonella saintpaul that appears, through epidemiology, to be linked to certain tomatoes in the marketplace during late April and May. Unfortunately, our collective ability to detect this outbreak early, or to quickly identify and isolate its source, has been inadequate. No one in public health nor industry can be satisfied with an outbreak that went undetected for so long, nor a traceback investigation that has left consumers scared about the safety of all fresh tomatoes and will likely cost more than \$100 million to tomato growers, packers and retailers whose produce was never contaminated. We simply must work together to do better.

As the two national multi-commodity trade associations representing the fresh produce industry, we are writing to ask you to convene a meeting of CDC, FDA and industry representatives to address ways we can learn from each other and work together to enhance food safety and minimize the human and economic impact of an outbreak. We believe there simply have to be solutions to help speed and streamline outbreak identification and management, and we pledge our industry's complete commitment to this effort.

With government's expertise in outbreak identification and industry's expertise in understanding the complex produce supply chain, we could set up an ongoing working group to look at crisis management systems in advance of outbreak investigations, rather than seemingly reinvent the process each time an outbreak occurs. Should an outbreak occur, we stand ready to offer FDA and CDC a 24-7 team of industry experts in every discipline to help in traceback investigations to ensure the fastest possible isolation of problems. If CDC or FDA feel that they need greater produce experience in their own ranks, we could work with you to develop something similar to a Presidential Fellows program in which government could detail produce experts to the agencies for one-or-two year commitments.

These are just some of the ideas we would like to discuss, and we are sure there are many other opportunities FDA and CDC can see better than us. But we hope this gives you a sense of our urgency and commitment to develop more effective ways to identify and manage outbreaks.

You should also know that our first and foremost commitment is to prevent foodborne disease outbreaks or potential contamination from ever occurring. Our industry is totally committed to prevention, but realistically, we must also recognize there is no such thing as zero risk for a product grown in an open natural environment and consumed without thermal processing or another kill step. In the rare but critical cases where outbreaks do occur, we simply must do a better job to remove any threat to public health as soon as humanly possible, and isolate potential problems quickly to ensure ongoing consumer confidence in the vast supply of healthy, fresh produce available across the country.

We ask that you and your staff please contact either of us if you have any questions, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Thomas E. Stenzel  
President and CEO  
United Fresh Produce Association



Bryan Silbermann  
President  
Produce Marketing Association

Cc: Andrew C. von Eschenbach, M.D., Commissioner, U.S. Food & Drug Administration  
David W.K. Acheson, M.D., Associate Commissioner for Foods, U.S. Food & Drug Administration  
Julie Gerberding M.D., Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,  
Lonnie King, DVM, Director, National Center for Zoonotic, Vector-Borne, and Enteric Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention