



October 1, 2007

Interagency Working Group on Import Safety
Division of Dockets Management (HFA-305)
Food and Drug Administration
5630 Fishers Lane, Room 1061, Rockville, MD 20852

RE: Docket 2007N-0330
Imported Food Safety

The United Fresh Produce Association (United Fresh) is pleased to submit comments to the Interagency Working Group on Import Safety on behalf of more 1,200 member companies that distribute and market the large majority of fresh produce sold in the United States.

The association is a vertically integrated trade organization that represents growers, shippers, fresh-cut processors, brokers, wholesalers and distributors of produce, working together with their customers at retail and foodservice, suppliers throughout the distribution chain, and international partners including importers and international suppliers of fresh produce.

We mention these characteristics because our organization's views on food safety are shaped by this broad and diverse membership across the entire produce industry, not any one sector or region. Within our industry, there are always diverse and strongly held views on each issue we face. Our association attempts to understand all viewpoints and advocate for the best overall industry policies and practices to serve the consumer.

The fresh produce industry supports a strong and credible U.S. food protection system that provides assurance to the public that they can safely enjoy the wide array of fresh fruits and vegetables found in America's supermarkets and restaurants. After all, one of the most important public health mandates by government today is for Americans to greatly increase consumption of fruits and vegetables to meet the U.S Dietary Guidelines. Public fear of consuming fresh, healthy and safe produce – even despite the inevitability of some small level of risk – cannot be an acceptable outcome.

The Food and Drug Administration is responsible for ensuring the safety of all domestic and imported fresh and fresh-cut fruits and vegetables consumed in the United States. Our industry must and will do all we can to grow, pack and process the safest possible products. But no matter what steps we take as an industry, the law requires, and the public demands, that FDA as an independent, public health agency be the final arbiter of what is safe enough.

We commend the President for appointing this Interagency Working Group on Import Safety and all of the Cabinet secretaries and staff who have worked hard to develop its Report to the President on September 10, 2007. We have hosted Secretary Leavitt, Commissioner Von Eschenbach and other officials looking at various stages of the fresh produce import supply chain, and worked to demonstrate our industry's commitment to continuous improvement.

We support the Working Group's Strategic Framework, focused on Prevention, Intervention, and Response. Our industry is committed to all three strategies in our own efforts, beginning with prevention of contamination at the field level wherever produce is grown and throughout our distribution chain. We have rapid intervention steps in place whenever risks are identified, again following our product from field to table. Finally, we are building stronger traceability systems and the ability to rapidly remove any potentially hazardous products from public consumption if and when a problem is identified.

The Board of Directors of United Fresh Produce Association has adopted a series of principles for produce food safety that guide our overall approach.

To protect public health and ensure consumer confidence, produce safety standards:

- *Must allow for a commodity-specific approach, based on the best available science.*
- *Must be consistent and applicable to the identified commodity or commodity sector, no matter where grown or packaged in the United States, or imported into the country.*
- *Must be federally mandated with sufficient federal oversight of compliance in order to be most credible to consumers.*

In the case of imported produce, we believe it is essential that industry and governmental agencies alike have in place a system of public health protection that assures that both domestic and imported produce meet the same public health and safety standards. That is certainly the law today once products reach the border, but we recognize that FDA needs to do more to provide public confidence that potential hazards are prevented from entering our food supply long before any type of border inspection program. As has been said many times, we cannot inspect our way to safety; we must build safety into all of our food systems from the ground up.

There have been several intriguing concepts discussed by the Working Group and other stakeholders as to how FDA might better meet this goal. These include options for government to government programs to assure equivalency of food safety standards for product exported to the United States; certification by importers that foods produced outside of the United States meet U.S. standards; and similar concepts. We urge the Working Group and the appropriate regulatory agencies to study these options carefully to determine which approaches might best meet the public's need for greater confidence in our food protection system, while causing the least disruption necessary to a tremendously complex produce supply chain. This is particularly important in a highly perishable industry such as ours, where fast flow of goods through the supply chain is essential. Any specific proposals should be published by the appropriate regulatory agencies for public notice and comment in order to receive widespread stakeholder review.

As the Working Group continues to evaluate options, we urge the Administration to provide strong and continued leadership to this effort. The American public expects that government will take all appropriate steps to assure public safety. For the food industry in which zero risk is always our goal but never a scientific certainty, we are particularly dependent upon government's assurance that all needed steps are being taken to protect and promote the public health.

Thank you for your consideration.



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President and CEO