

## Florida Counties Poised to Begin Shipping Tomatoes Again after Being Added to FDA's Safe to Eat List

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### Industry Estimates Economic Losses Could Add up to More Than \$500 Million

Florida's tomato growers enthusiastically welcomed the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's announcement that consumers are clear to eat tomatoes harvested in 19 Florida counties. The counties encompass the Ruskin-Palmetto and Quincy areas of the state, Florida's prime tomato-producing regions.

The FDA said the following counties are not associated with the outbreak of Salmonella saintpaul: Jackson, Gadsden, Leon, Jefferson, Madison, Suwannee, Hamilton, Hillsborough, Polk, Manatee, Hardee, Desoto, Sarasota, Highlands, Pasco, Sumter, Citrus, Hernando and Charlotte.

'This allows us to get Florida tomatoes back into supermarkets and restaurants and to move forward in rebuilding consumer confidence in safe, healthy produce,' said Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange. 'Our growers are working overtime to get their products back into the marketplace.'

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services worked with the FDA to get the counties added to the 'safe to eat' list. Growers will provide a certificate issued by the state with each shipment of tomatoes verifying they were harvested after May 1. The Tomato Growers Exchange urges restaurants and supermarkets to contact their shippers for more information.

The losses already incurred by the state's tomato industry during the outbreak are major. Growers estimate that ultimately the economic impact will be more than \$500 million.

'Until now, the market has been in complete collapse. Crops have remained in fields, packinghouses and in the distribution system,' Brown said. 'The losses are staggering.'

No illnesses linked to Salmonella saintpaul have been reported in the Southeast, a primary destination for Florida tomatoes this time of year. 'It's unfortunate that anyone has become ill. However, we've had confidence in our tomatoes all along - we just had to wait for FDA and the CDC to do their trace-back work,' Brown said.

The Florida tomato industry remains committed to the production of a safe product. Florida is the first state in the country to adopt a comprehensive food safety program with mandatory government inspection and audit of its tomatoes. 'Those involved in the growing and marketing of fresh tomatoes voluntarily incorporate food safety as part of their everyday business practices,' he said. 'We're committed to taking the steps necessary to ensure consumer confidence in our crops.'

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