

Tomato Industry Leaders Testify on Legislation Based on California/Florida Model Programs

2008-07-31

Ed Beckman, president of the California Tomato Farmers cooperative, and Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Exchange testified in front of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, House Energy and Commerce Committee hearing today to express support for responsible nationwide food safety legislation modeled after the mandatory programs implemented by their two groups.

'We believe these programs in California and Florida offer the best examples of how food safety programs, including mandatory trace back requirements, should be implemented in every state,' Brown said.

Both programs have established food safety guidelines for farmers and handlers and stringent field verification audits by inspectors from their respective state departments of agriculture. Packing sheds and facilities are subjected to random and unannounced government inspections, which include verifying their ability to conduct trace backs of their products. The trace back requirements mandated under these Florida and California programs exceed current federal requirements under the Bioterrorism Act of 2002 as well as current California state regulations.

The California Tomato Farmers cooperative was established in 2006 and began its inspection programs last year. Florida's food safety regulations became effective July 1, 2008. Together, both organizations represent 70 percent of the nation's fresh tomato supply.

'The Florida and California programs have been cited as models for the industry. We believe that what we have learned over the past two years during program implementation can be used to develop responsible regulation on a nationwide basis,' Beckman said. 'This would not only promote food safety to protect public health but also level the playing field among all tomato producers so that we are all working under the same regulatory framework.'

Brown added, 'Ed and I will be happy to offer any assistance and guidance we can to federal regulators and legislators who would like to learn more about our food safety and trace back programs.'

Since 2004, both groups have worked closely with national produce associations, food safety experts and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to draft the 'Commodity Specific Food Safety Guidance for Fresh Tomatoes,' which provides comprehensive guidance for the entire North American tomato supply chain from field to fork.

Both Ed Beckman and Reggie Brown will be available to answer any media inquiries about today's hearing and their testimony. Ed Beckman can be reached at (559) 281-3095. Reggie Brown can be reached at (407) 660-1949.

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