

Public Statement

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has issued an import alert regarding entry of cantaloupe from Agropecuaria Montelibano, a Honduran grower and packer, because, based on current information, fruit from this company **appears to be associated with a Salmonella Litchfield outbreak in the United States and Canada**. The import alert advises FDA field offices that all cantaloupes shipped to the United States by this company are to be detained.

In addition, the FDA has contacted importers about this action and is advising U.S. grocers, food service operators, and produce processors to remove from their stock any cantaloupes from this company. The FDA also advises consumers who have recently bought cantaloupes to check with the place of purchase to determine if the fruit came from this specific grower and packer. If so, consumers should throw away the cantaloupes.

There is currently a multi-state outbreak of Salmonella Litchfield. CDC reports 58 cases in 16 states (CA, CO, GA, MO, NJ, NY, OH, OK, OR, TN, UT, WA, WI, AZ, IL, and NM) and Canada having culture-confirmed Salmonella Litchfield infections with matching PFGE patterns since January 10, 2008. The serotype is characterized as uncommon. Based on findings of a case-control study, CDC concluded a statistical association between consumption of cantaloupe and illnesses, and requested that FDA initiate a trace back.

The FDA is taking this preventive measure while the agency continues to investigate this outbreak in cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state partners.

Even though we do not question the conclusion of the CDC study that relates cantaloupe melons to illnesses we do question the incrimination of our company because:

1. The incrimination is solely based on the trace back of two cases. By common sense we may conclude that a trace back will never be secure considering the fact that inventories are constantly moving at all levels of the supply chain and it is impossible to guarantee that the consumed cantaloupes were actually ours. And it is even more questionable with so few cases being studied.
2. The incrimination is missing the most important factor which is a positive sample of our melons with a culture-confirmed Salmonella Litchfield with matching PFGE patterns. FDA has not performed any tests on our shipments and has not come to our farms to take any samples.
3. At the moment we have 6 entries in process of examination with FDA prior notice codes:

080076921702, 0076821451, 080077397691, 080077397816, 080077544831,
080077161835.

We assume that the FDA will sample these shipments and perform appropriate tests. We will closely follow these results and all the ones to come and inform you accordingly.

4. We feel completely confident that all results will be negative and that our melons are not the ones that have created the problem. As evidence to support this statement, we have a total of 113 specific salmonella analysis performed to our cantaloupe melons at independent certified laboratories that picked the samples themselves from December 22nd 2007 to March 13th 2008 and a total of 24 specific salmonella analysis performed to packing house water, irrigation water, land, and packing personal from the 12th of December 2007 to march 14th 2008. The results of all the analysis have been negative. It seems unlikely that any contamination would not have been identified in all these recent analyses.

5. We consider that this publication from FDA is not fair to our Company, since we have never had a positive test with Salmonella or any other bacteria during the 30 years we have been exporting melons to the USA and 20 years to Europe and UK! We are the largest exporter in volumes to Europe in Central American and are the only ones who cover directly 90% of the supermarkets in Great Britain. Great Britain is the most demanding market and our importers in this region take bacteriological analysis upon every arrival. In addition, they also demand from us certifications for good agricultural practices in both production and packing which are even stricter than certifications requested to export fruit to the United States.

You have honored us by being our costumers, many of whom go back since we started 30 years ago. Most of you and your costumers have visited our operation and know the amount of effort and dedication that every one of us put in to every detail. It is not accident that we have gained your confidence and the confidence of so many of your costumers. The most important supermarkets and fresh cutters in the US, the UK and Europe buy our products. Every one of them has specific needs and requests and we have managed to comply with them. This is what has allowed us to perfect our agricultural, packing, and cooling practices.

Besides complying with the costumers own audits we have been working with third party auditors for many years, our last audit was done from the 15th to 22nd of January 2008 and our scores are as follow:

Santa Rosa Farm

Good agricultural practices 97%
Good manufacturing practices 96%

Montelibano Farm

Good agricultural practices 99%

Good manufacturing practices 98%

In addition, we are also certified under the Global Gap norm.

It's still too early to quantify the damage of this precipitous action by the FDA, but it could mean bankruptcy and leaving up to 5,000 hardworking people jobless.

In this document you will find:

1. Cantaloupe microbiological analysis at origin
2. Cantaloupe microbiological analysis at destination
3. Packing plant water microbiological analysis
4. Irrigation water microbiological analysis
5. Workers hand microbiological analysis
6. Third party certificates
7. Honduran government official visits

We have a meeting scheduled for Monday the 24th of March at 2:00 PM with the FDA authorities, representative from our company, Honduras officials and our legal representatives. We will keep you posted on the result of this meeting and all new developments.