

# Joint U.S.-Mexico Actions Advance to Preserve Food Safety

The Outbreak Response and Prevention group of Mexico and the United States aims to improve effective and timely attention for the identification of events associated with food for human consumption marketed in both countries.



The actions carried out by the working groups of the Alliance for Food Safety have allowed health agencies of Mexico and the United States to harmonize and optimize laboratory processes and speed up the response to outbreaks associated with foods marketed in both countries.

This was highlighted by those attending the Food Safety Alliance Steering Committee Meeting, in which the United States participated through the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Mexico was represented by officials from the National Agri-Food Health, Safety, and Quality Service (Senasica) and the Federal Commission for Protection against Health Risks (Cofepris).

Among the advances reported by the Strategic Priorities working group is the purpose of focusing actions on prevention, to strengthen the production of safe vegetables and the communication and information exchange mechanisms between the three sanitary agencies.

The Secretariat of Agriculture and Rural Development agency fulfilled its commitment to develop the Protocol for Contamination Risk Reduction Systems in the primary production of onions in Chihuahua, which is already published on Senasica's website.

For the application of the protocol in the current production cycle, close collaboration has been kept with the production sector, training events are being held for onion producers in Chihuahua, and there are plans to extend them nationwide.

Senasica moved a mobile laboratory to the state of Chihuahua to test the product (onion) and water in situ to detect pathogens such as *Salmonella* spp. in a timely manner.

This group reported on the link established between the Mexican and U.S. papaya industries in the pilot phase for self-regulation to prevent the risk of product contamination.

With the coordination between Senasica, Cofepris and FDA, it has been possible to extend the training of papaya growers and packers, which has contributed to ensure the safety of the fruit in each link of the production chain.

The participants emphasized that the papaya program is an example of success, so a similar alignment will be sought with other agricultural products, such as onions.

They also agreed to continue collaborating on the listing of cilantro production units ready to export to the United States, whose production process began in April.

The group that deals with laboratory collaboration reported that they have worked on the harmonization and optimization of methods and reagents used by laboratories in Mexico and the United States for the detection of *Cyclospora cayentanensis* and *Salmonella*.

A distance learning plan on *Cyclospora cayetanensis* methodology was established through working groups and webinars, which contains new and useful information that technicians can consult at any time from their laboratory.

An information exchange exercise has been carried out to verify that all participants have the necessary equipment and reagents to detect the pathogen and thus be able to work together on the methodology.

Technicians from the three agencies compared the pathogen detection methodologies they use and, although they found that they are similar, they detected possibilities for harmonization of laboratory procedures.

They recognized that Senasica has made great advances in Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS) and that by being a member of the FDA Genome Trak network; it had shared sequence information of pathogenic organisms, which allows the teams of the two countries to measure the scope that the three agencies can achieve in collaboration.

The FDA plans to soon hold face-to-face training events for Cofepris and Senasica technicians on sequencing and other topics of interest.

## Strength of Interagency Communication Highlighted

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They reviewed the Binational Outbreak Notification Protocol, which was used in the *Salmonella Oranienburg* outbreak, allegedly related to onions imported from Mexico, which streamlined communication and allowed follow-up and exchange of information in less time.

With this experience, they proved that the strength of communication to share available epidemiological and pathogen sequencing information among the three agencies has allowed them to reduce response times.

Senasica and Cofepris participated in a training to learn about the processes and methodologies used by the FDA for

traceability investigations when an outbreak linked to food consumption occurs.

The Food Safety Training group reported that to disseminate this topic, Cofepris in collaboration with the FDA and Senasica organized three informative sessions on the EducaPRIS platform, which have been viewed by more than 2,430 people.

The FDA presented the Foreign Supplier Verification Process (FSVP), Senasica the Contamination Risk Reduction Systems (SRRRC) and Cofepris offered information on the Inspection and Monitoring System for Packers.

Similarly, 218 verifiers from the 32 states were trained in Fruit and Vegetable Sanitary Control and the FDA's Fresh Produce Safety Regulation (PSR), training that was replicated for the personnel of the sanitary jurisdictions, reaching 361 people.

For its part, Senasica has trained 300 producers on the PSR and 852 people on the SRRRCs, surpassing the goal of 840 training sessions.

The FDA presented the Mango Prevention Strategy, and in collaboration with Senasica and Cofepris offered three trainings to instructors and mango producers from Sinaloa, Nayarit and Jalisco.

After listening to the reports of the four working groups that make up the Alliance, the members of the Steering Committee highlighted that even with the complications of collaboration that the pandemic represented; there were significant advances, which demonstrates the commitment of the technicians of the three agencies.

The participants emphasized that these actions are of great benefit to both producers and consumers, who are offered more guarantees about the food that is produced and marketed in Mexico and the United States.

They emphasized that it is essential to share knowledge on these issues, which is why mechanisms are being sought to provide large-scale training for all productive sectors.