Transcript for FDA Media Briefing
Salmonella Outbreak Involving Certain Type of Tomatoes
June 20, 2008

Coordinator: Welcome and thank you for standing by. At this time all participants are in a listen-only mode. During the question and answer session you may press star 1 on your touchtone phone. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections you may disconnect at this time.

Now I'll turn the meeting over to your host for today's conference Mr. Michael Herndon. Sir you may begin.

Michael Herndon: Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen welcome. I'm Michael Herndon with FDA's media relations staff. Thanks and welcome to today's briefing on salmonella in tomato outbreak.

Our three speakers this afternoon are Dr. David Acheson, Associate Commissioner for Food; Dr. Ian Williams, Chief OutbreakNet Team CDC; and Ms. Faye Feldstein, Acting Director Office of Food Defense Communications and Emergency Response with FDA.

Now we will have a brief question and session segment after the opening remarks. I also should let you know that we will have two subject experts from FDA. They are Melinda Plaisier, Associate Commissioner Office of International Programs; and Steve Solomon, Director - Deputy Director excuse me Office of Regional Operations.

Now at this time I will turn it over to Dr. David Acheson. Dr. Acheson?

David Acheson: Thanks Mike. This is David Acheson, Associate Commissioner for Foods at FDA. I'd like to once again welcome you to our update call. As in the past

we'll follow the same format. Dr. Williams will give an update from CDC. I'll then follow the update from FDA along with Faye Feldstein.

So Ian I'll hand it over to you please.

Ian Williams: Thank you Dr. Acheson and good afternoon everyone. Just as a brief overview CDC has been collaborating with Public Health Officials in many states, the Indian Health Service and the U.S. Food & Drug Administration in this investigation - ongoing investigation of this multi-state outbreak of human salmonella serotype Saint Paul infection.

Today CDC is going to post updated numbers. These numbers will all be available on our website hopefully by close of business today. So since April there now have been 552 persons identified with salmonella Saint Paul with the same genetic fingerprint. These persons have now been identified in 32 states and the District of Columbia.

There's been a marked increase in cases reported over the last week and I want to emphasize to everyone as we said on Wednesday that this marked increase in reported ill persons is primarily due - is not primarily due to a large number of new infections.

The number of reported ill persons increased markedly mainly because some states improved surveillance for salmonella in response to this outbreak and because laboratory identification of many previously submitted strains were completed. And just to make this point the bulk of the new cases reported were from the State of Texas. State of Texas is now reporting 265 illnesses.

Among the 281 persons for whom we have information available the illnesses began on April 10 and range up to June 10. Patients range in age from 1 to 88

years of age, 49% are female and we're aware of at least 53 persons who have been hospitalized.

No deaths have been officially attributed to this outbreak however we are aware of a man in his 60s who died in Texas from cancer and had an infection with the outbreak strain of salmonella Saint Paul at the time of his death. This infection may have contributed to his death.

So I think I will stop there and throw it back to Dr. Acheson.

David Acheson: Great. Thanks Dr. Williams. This is David Acheson again. From FDA's perspective I want to let you know that we have completed the tracebacks for some of the tomatoes that have taken us from the point of purchase or consumption - or the point of consumption all the way back to certain farms in Mexico and Florida.

Now that we know the paths that those tomatoes have traveled between the farms and the consumer we're looking all along those pathways to see where the contamination occurred.

What this means is that we know that tomatoes start out on a farm and move through packing sheds and warehouses and supplier chains and distribution centers. And we are going to all of those places to see there are any problems or any areas - points that could indicate how or why these tomatoes got contaminated.

The next key part of this investigation is to narrow this further. And to do that we are really embarking on three main efforts. The first is a joint investigation between the FDA and authorities in Florida and Mexico; continued sampling of products both domestic and imported; and continuing to pursue new

tracebacks. All of those three endeavors are really being driven to narrow further where these tomatoes have come from.

I want to let you know that FDA is sending teams of multi-disciplinary experts to both Mexico and Florida this weekend with the goal of conducting joint inspections on the farms and throughout the distribution chain.

FDA is working jointly with Mexico and Florida together with other states to update the list of areas not associated with the outbreak and we'll continue to post that on our website as we have before.

We're also working with the State of Texas to traceback a cluster of illnesses. As you've heard from Dr. Williams there are a lot of cases in Texas. And we have identified with the health departments in Texas I should rephrase that - the Texas Health Department has identified the cluster and FDA is working with them along with the CDC to essentially use that cluster as another traceback in the hope that that traceback will further narrow the source of the contaminated tomatoes.

It's important to note that our message to consumers and industry has not changed. In just a moment I'll ask Faye Feldstein to go over that with you. There is one other point that I want to make that I know there has been some confusion with consumers about this and I want to just emphasize this point. Is that we obviously have illnesses in multiple states and District of Columbia. We have also have exclusions in multiple states. And those two facts are unrelated to each other.

Just because a state is growing tomatoes that's not part of the outbreak does not mean that members of that state - people in that state couldn't have

consumed tomatoes that were grown somewhere else -- Mexico or Florida -- that were then brought into the state and consumed.

There's a little bit of a question of well how can you exclude specific states - Texas for example how can you exclude Texas and there's 265 cases in Texas. That's why.

We need to - it's an important message that the illnesses do not relate to the exclusion of the growing of tomatoes in that state. And if we need more clarification on that during the questions please ask me to do that.

With that I'll hand over to Faith Feldstein who will tell you a little bit about the current consumer message. Faye?

Faye Feldstein: Hello everyone. This is Faye Feldstein of FDA’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Acting Direct of the Office of Food Defense, Communication and Emergency Response.

I'd like to talk to you a little bit in more detail about what does this new information mean for consumers. And basically the message that we have been providing to consumers, to retailers, and the food service industry as well does not change at this point.

Cherry tomatoes, grape tomatoes, tomatoes sold with the vines still attached from any source are not associated with this outbreak. Red Roma, Red Plum, and Red Round tomatoes from the geographic areas listed on our website are also not associated with this outbreak. And we want - that is a consistent message that we've had since the beginning over the past couple of weeks with this outbreak.

As David indicated we are continuing to work jointly with Florida and Mexico and other entities to update the list of geographic areas that are not associated with this outbreak. We will continue to post those updates on our website as we get more data from the many sources that Dr. Acheson described.

Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Thank you Ms. Feldstein. At this time ladies and gentlemen we will take your questions. Please limit yourselves to one question and one follow up and please state your name and affiliation.

Operator we'll take the first question.

Coordinator: Thank you. Once again if you'd like to ask a question please press star 1. To withdraw your request please press star 2. One moment please.

Our first question comes from Clayton Sandell from ABC News. Your line is open.

Clayton Sandell: Hi. Thanks for the update. Just to clarify you have narrowed this to Florida and Mexico or you have actually identified the individual farms where these tomatoes came from and if so where are those locations?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. What the traceback has done is take us back to a number of different farms in Florida and in Mexico. At this stage two points to that.

Number one we don't know for certain that the contamination occurred on a farm. The contamination may have occurred upstream of the farm in the terms

of in a distribution center or a packing shed, the warehouse. And it's important that we inspect in those areas to rule that out.

So we cannot assume that the contamination has occurred on a farm. And we've got several farms in both Florida and Mexico and those are the places along with their associated distribution chain that we are going to be getting into as quickly as possible. And as I've said we've got teams being dispatched this weekend to start that.

Because it's part of an investigation I'm not able to name the farms that we're going to inspect. They have not been directly implicated because we do not have a farm where we know this problem occurred. We just know that they are part of the traceback and we need to look at the whole chain.

Michael Herndon: Okay. Did you have a follow up sir?

Clayton Sandell: No thank you.

Michael Herndon: Okay. Thanks. Next question please (Debbie).

Coordinator: Our next question is from Louise Schiavone from CNN. Your line is open.

Louise Schiavone: Hello and thank you for taking my call. Couple of questions. Are you certain given the status of this investigation that the source of the salmonella Saint Paul outbreak is in fact tomatoes? You don't have a tomato sample yet that you're working from, right?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. We do not have a positive salmonella in tomato.

Louise Schiavone: And secondly with tomatoes then -- and I guess this is for the CDC and this is my only other question -- was tomatoes number one on your list as suspected links to the salmonella Saint Paul outbreak? Could you tell us what are numbers 2, 3 and 4 on your suspect list?

David Acheson: Before Ian you answer that can you just address the question about how sure we are its tomatoes - maybe explain the process that we go through to identify tomatoes?

Sorry. Thanks Ian. Go ahead.

Ian Williams: Yeah so this is Ian Williams from CDC. And yeah as Dr. Acheson mentioned let me tell you a little bit about the process that we did in order to determine this was tomatoes.

When this outbreak was first reported to us by New Mexico back on the 22 of May we didn't know at that point if it was food at all. There were a number of other things we were considering.

And the process we started with was hypothesis generating. We went out - folks in New Mexico and Texas went and interviewed about 20 cases and looked at a whole variety of exposures - everything from a variety of different foods to animal contacts to common events they might have occurred.

And through this process of interviewing these folks one of the things that came clear is that almost all of them had consumed raw tomatoes in the weeks prior to illness, many of them just in the day or two prior to their onsets of illness.

So this formed a hypothesis for which we then did an analytic epidemiologic study to try to confirm whether this hypothesis was indeed true. So this process then involved taking ill people, asking them a structured questionnaire and comparing them to people who were well. These people were matched on age and geography.

I want to make it clear in the second study we asked a lot of information about tomatoes but we also asked information on other things that were seen in common in our hypothesis generating.

So these are other foods or items which were common. So we didn't ask just about tomatoes. We asked about some other things that were common among the cases as well.

In this epidemiologic study we found a strong statistical association with consumption of raw tomatoes in the week prior to illness. This study was conducted with cases initially from Texas and New Mexico.

We've continued to interview cases outside Texas and New Mexico in these other states and we're seeing exactly the same association -- high rates of tomato consumption and statistical differences in consumption among these other cases compared to national population surveys.

Louise Schiavone: All right. Could you tell me what are numbers 2, 3, and 4 on your suspect list?

Ian Williams: I would say we don't have numbers 2, 3, and 4 on suspect list. That epidemiologic data indicates that this is tomatoes.

Louise Schiavone: Are tortillas not number 2 on that list?

Ian Williams: So some of the initial hypothesis generating and case control studies suggested a potential association with tortillas but additional analysis and interviewing of cases suggested that tortillas didn't have anything to do with this.

Again in our case control study we asked about a number of other exposure including tortillas. And in some of the early analysis a number of cases who had eaten tomatoes had also eaten tortillas as well.

But as we gained more data and looked in other places this association with - initial preliminary association didn't persist.

David Acheson: Ian this is David Acheson. Maybe you could just mention whether this was any different from the typical epidemiologic investigations the CDC conducts with state and local...

Ian Williams: No this is exactly the same process we do where we interview cases, generic hypotheses and then test them. And I want to say that we also examine the data. We just don't stop - as we find epidemiologic evidence we continue to look at the data and re-evaluate as it comes in.

And that's exactly what we've done in this investigation. We continue to interview cases, look at consumption history among tomatoes. And we're also continuing to use this case control study - case questionnaire which asks about a range of other foods as well.

Michael Herndon: Thanks Ian. Thanks Louise.

Louise Schiavone: Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Lauran Neergaard from the Associated Press. Your line is open.

Lauran Neergaard: Hi. Thank you. A question for each of you. Dr. Acheson could you tell us how many different farms in Florida and Mexico you're sending teams to? How many of those tracebacks actually, you know, resulted in something you could send a team to?

David Acheson: I'm not able to disclose numbers I'm afraid. What I can tell you is that we're going to get investigators out to all of them. So just because the - we need to maintain the confidentiality of these states at the moment. And if I start to give numbers then that leads to probably inappropriate speculation.

So - as this unfolds we've been updating everybody regularly. We'll continue to do that and share with the public the information as it unfolds. So I apologize I can't be more specific but that's the status.

Lauran Neergaard: Okay. And back to Dr. Williams. Refresh my memory here. It sounds like this is now larger than the 2004 tomato salmonella outbreak and thus would be the largest we know?

Ian Williams: I believe that's indeed true. I don’t have that number in front of me but I know it was around 500. So I think this is - if it's not the largest it's approaching it.

David Acheson: This is David Acheson again. Lauran to your question I want to again emphasize that this is not just the farms that we're inspecting. It is the whole distribution chain.

I wouldn't like the message to go out that we've isolated this to a farm and we just won't say which. We've isolated it to somewhere on these distribution chains and that's what we're going to do next to see if we can find the point where the contamination occurred.

Lauran Neergaard: Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Okay thanks. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Jon Rockfield from the Baltimore Sun. Your line is open. Please check your mute button sir.

Jon Rockfield: Thanks. Sorry about that. The identification of these farms did that come from the traceback of the cluster of nine people from Chicago or was that from a number of different tracebacks?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. It was from all of the tracebacks that we've been doing. The cluster was part of that. But it was more than just that.

Jon Rockfield: And the cluster in Texas can you say where in Texas that cluster was?

David Acheson: I'm not able to disclose that. No. If you want more information on that I suggest you call the Texas Department of Health.

Jon Rockfield: Okay. Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Thanks Jon. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Adrian Klein from CNN. Your line is open.

Adrian Klein: Thank you. You might've touched on this Ian with the question of how many farms you were looking at. How many inspectors are you sending out this weekend?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. As many as we need. We've got - essentially what we're going to do is develop the resources we need to get the job done. If this expands - as I said, you know, we've got other tracebacks that are getting underway now. If that leads to other places that we need to go to in either Florida or Mexico and there's a need to get another team together we'll do that.

If there's a need to add to these teams when we get down there we'll do that as well. So we're just going to put the resources that are needed to get the job done.

Adrian Klein: Is it - just my follow up - is it possible that these tomatoes came from both Florida and Mexico do you believe?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson again. I said from the beginning it's extremely unlikely that this rare type of salmonella Saint Paul contamination occurred at two points at the same time.

I think at the end of the day the goal here is to find some single point where contamination occurred somewhere in the distribution chain. And that's why we're continuing with the tracebacks and not simply saying oh well it obviously came from two places.

We don't believe it came from two places. This is an unusual serotype type and that would just not make any sense in terms of (unintelligible). I will add before somebody asks the question because I have seen questions around this well could it be deliberate?

There is - we have looked in that and there is no evidence whatsoever that this is deliberate. Because that is certainly a possibility and we are constantly vigilant to thinking about whether a foodborne illness was done deliberately.

That would explain it being in two places. But there's absolutely no evidence whatsoever either internally with FDA or through conversations with the intelligence community or anybody else that this was deliberate.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. Thanks Adrian. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Elizabeth Lee from Atlanta Journal Constitution. Your line is open.

Elizabeth Lee: Hi. Thanks for taking my call. Dr. Acheson I asked you this last week but I want to ask it again given the latest onset date that CDC is giving of June 10 which was several days after the warning went out on tomatoes.

Is there any chance that there could be a source that is continuing to contaminate tomatoes that's still out there and getting tomatoes that are still in the pipeline?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. I think the way you phrased the question is it conceivable that there is a source - it is conceivable. And that is why we've got to keep pushing this as fast and as hard as we can. That is why we want to go and look throughout the distribution pipeline from farm right through the distribution chain just in case there is an ongoing problem.

I'll ask Dr. Williams to speak to the ongoing nature of this one more time. But we're assuming this outbreak is ongoing. Is that right Dr. Williams?

Ian Williams: Yeah that's indeed correct. I mean, we're characterizing this outbreak as ongoing. We're still hearing about onset dates of people who have not been genetically fingerprinted beyond this June 10 date.

So we don't know if they're part of this outbreak yet but we're still characterizing the outbreak as ongoing.

David Acheson: So to get back to your point that's why it's so critical for us to go all points in this distribution chain and not just to a farm either in Florida or Mexico where the harvesting may have stopped and you could say well it clearly is over. We have got to continue to be aggressive on this which we will be.

Elizabeth Lee: A follow up then - how can you assure people that places on your cleared list are safe and that it's okay to eat tomatoes if you haven't - you're really not sure the outbreak is over?

David Acheson: All the evidence that we have from the tracebacks that we've done are taking us down these two pathways -- to Florida and Mexico -- through a number of distribution channels. At the moment there's nothing to indicate that it's extending beyond that.

Obviously if new information comes in that would require us to re-examine that we clearly would. And we would alert the public. But at this point there's no indication that it's outside of the bounds where we currently are.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Neil Osterweil from Medscape Medical News. Your line is open.

Neil Osterweil: Hi. Thanks for taking the call. One - I came in a little bit late. Could you please just repeat the most total number of cases that have been reported?

Ian Williams: Sure. Hi this is Ian Williams from CDC. So it's a total of 552 persons infected with salmonella Saint Paul with the same genetic fingerprint in 32 states and the District of Columbia.

Neil Osterweil: Thank you. And the other question was what would be your advice to clinicians? Are you going to ask everyone to send in stool samples? You know, other than asking patients obviously about their consumption how do you get from being overwhelmed?

Ian Williams: Our advice to clinicians is to keep - do what they always do is take care of patients and for patients they suspect have salmonella is work with their local and state health departments to get these reported.

Neil Osterweil: And then that would come to you?

Ian Williams: Yeah because we work in partnership with the Safe Public Health Laboratories would then do the testing necessary to determine whether they actually are part of this outbreak or not.

Neil Osterweil: Just one more follow up please. Since (unintelligible) is not a reportable disease are you confident you're getting a fair reporting of the numbers?

Ian Williams: Yeah so we have actually talked about this in some of the earlier calls that the people we see who get reported are actually the minority of cases. That in previous studies it's been shown that there are 30 or more cases for each case of salmonella infection that get reported through the PulseNet system.

So the summary here is these 552 persons may actually represent several thousand illnesses in the United States.

Neil Osterweil: Great. Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Carson Chambers of ABC Tampa. Your line is open.

Carson Chambers: Thank you. I'm calling from the Tampa Bay area. Our counties here including Hillsboro, Manatee and Polk have been cleared - cleared counties for tomatoes. Can you talk about if this still remains the same?

And also if you could talk about what part of Florida are we talking about that you're sending inspectors to this weekend?

David Acheson: David Acheson. I'm not able to talk about the parts of Florida that we're sending inspectors to because again for the same reasoning. The point is that we are sending inspectors to farms and everything in the distribution chain in Florida and beyond where these tomatoes have passed.

Carson Chambers: Are there any parts of Florida you can rule out?

David Acheson: Yes. David Acheson again. There is an exclusion of part of Florida and I'll ask Faye Feldstein to address that particularly.

Faye Feldstein: Hello again everyone. This is Faye Feldstein. We've been working very closely with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to

provide us information utilizing criteria that's posted on our website to identify those counties in Florida where the tomatoes are not associated with the outbreak.

That list has been posted for several days as David Acheson indicated. As more information becomes available we will update our website as needed.

Michael Herndon: Does that help? Okay. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Justin Blum from Bloomberg News. Your line is open.

Justin Blum: Hi. Thanks for taking my call. I just want to make sure I'm totally clear Dr. Acheson on what you're saying about Florida and Mexico. Is your message today that the tomato is going to this outbreak definitely came from either Florida or Mexico?

David Acheson: Let me -- this is David Acheson -- let me try to say it one more time. The tracebacks that we've done takes us from the point of purchase or consumption -- so that could be a retail store or a restaurant -- all the way back to certain farms in Mexico and Florida. That essentially maps out the pathways between the consumer and the farm.

And the key point is here is that we're sending inspectors to all of the points on that pathway - the warehouses, the packing sheds, the distribution centers -- to see if there was anything that may have been going on or continuing to go on in those sites that may have been the cause of the outbreak.

So I am not saying that we have traced this back to farms in Mexico or Florida. We've got the whole pathway mapped out. And that's an important

message. We have not taken this back to a farm in either Florida or Mexico. It's the pathways that we're pursuing.

Justin Blum: So it definitely occurred along the pathway between - somewhere between farms in Mexico and Florida and consumers.

David Acheson: It's occurred - yes it occurred on pathways and the point is where.

Justin Blum: And it's either Mexico or Florida but it can't - you don't think it's both. Both you're sending investigators to both Mexico and Florida?

Dave Acheson: Right now all of the traceback data that we have point to this being Mexico or Florida. Currently we do not believe it's both. And that would be extremely unlikely as I have explained.

And the next phase of this is to narrow the whole area down through the investigations we've talked about, the continued sampling, and new tracebacks that are underway.

Michael Herndon: Thanks Justin.

Justin Blum: Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Bob Meyer from Brownfield Network. Your line is open.

Bob Meyer: Thank you. Just a clarification here. Given that you've narrowed the source down to Florida and Mexico are there any common denominators with the two

sources -- transport company, warehouse, processor -- that has handled tomatoes from both sources?

David Acheson: Yeah can you repeat the question? I didn't quite hear it all.

Bob Meyer: Okay. Again given that you've narrowed the source down to either Florida or Mexico right now are there any common denominators with the two sources -- a transport company, a warehouse or a processor -- that has handled tomatoes from both places?

David Acheson: At this point as I said we're going to send inspectors to all of them. There's no clear indication that there's any obvious crossover point. That's an excellent question. That is part of the investigation. We haven't identified any clear crossover point at this stage.

I want to just sort of again point that although we keep talking about Florida and Mexico tomatoes that are sold in any other state in the US are going to travel and potentially be handled and go through suppliers and distributors and other points - warehouses and we're going to those as well.

So it is certainly possible that the actual contamination itself occurred at one of those warehouses not necessarily in the State of Florida or in the country of Mexico.

But - I know this is a difficult concept. And everybody wants to grab onto oh it happened at the farm at such and such and what's their address and so on and so forth. That's what ultimately is the goal here.

But just remember a tomato that's made somebody sick in Vermont has come a long way if it started its life in Mexico. And a lot of suppliers, warehouses have potentially handled that tomato.

And we're looking for the points where all of these tomatoes that have gone to these multiple states at some point have all been together in the same place. Once they split off into individual tracks that's different.

So where between the farm that they were grown on and the point at which they tracked off in different directions could this contamination have occurred.

Michael Herndon: Okay thank you. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from (Alexandra Clinton) from CNN. Your line is open.

Alexandra Clinton: Hi. Thank you. I would like to know what intelligence and security agencies are involved in the investigation.

David Acheson: The primary -- this is David Acheson -- the primary agencies involved in the investigation from our side are FDA and CDC on the federal side. We have been liaising with multiple other federal agencies keeping them informed of progress and interacting with them.

Ian Williams: And the same is true for CDC as well.

Alexandra Clinton: Could you name those? You know, FBI, CIA...

David Acheson: We've been working with USDA, the Department of Homeland Security, and all of the components within that those are probably the two primary areas - the intelligence community.

We have within FDA specific people whose job it is to maintain connectivity with the intelligence community. They do that on an ongoing 24/7 basis. And there is constant dialogue between FDA and the intelligence community.

Anything out there that could indicate a problem - we've asked this question around this outbreak and have got nothing positive. Obviously I am not going to go into detail of what we do in terms of national security.

Alexandra Clinton: Okay thanks.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Annys Shin from the Washington Post. Your line is open.

Annys Shin: Hi. Thanks. I hate to harp on this but given the fact that it could've happened at a distribution point like a warehouse or a packing shed my vague understanding of the way things work in Florida is you'll have one packer that sort of works their way up the coast.

Do you really feel safe in clearing the areas that are producing now? I mean, how do you know that they're not using a warehouse or a distribution point that, you know, may have been used when other areas were harvesting, you know, when the outbreak began?

David Acheson: Yeah this is David Acheson. We looked very carefully at the information that we received from states and have asked those questions - could there by

crossover or those kinds of problems. And in order to be excluded we've got to have assurance that that isn't happening.

As I said before if we learn something that is different we would obviously change our consumer advice and our messages and change it on the website. But at this point there's no indication that that is what is happening.

I want to clarify one point in relation to the last question. I don't want to give the impression that we think even remotely this is deliberate. I put that out there not to raise concerns but simply to complete the picture for you.

Because now that we have narrowed this down to two tracks - two pathways that the tomatoes began their life in Florida or they began their life in Mexico and they tracked through and we're looking at the whole pathway there is the obvious question -- could it have happened in two places at once? Very unlikely from a natural perspective.

That raises the question of was it deliberate? Absolutely no indication it was deliberate. And I want to continue to emphasize that. We've got nothing to suggest that this is deliberate.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. Annys did you have a follow up?

Annys Shin: Sure. I had a follow up for Dr. Williams. The CDC advice from the site about salmonella says generally that people don't suffer long term health effects.

But I hear from, you know, victims' advocates and other medical experts that there are concerns about long term health effects. And I guess I'm thinking more broadly now not just with salmonella.

Do you - I guess as a public health official what concerns do you have about the long term health effects of foodborne illness?

Ian Williams: This is Ian Williams from CDC. Actually I have with me Dr. Robert Tokes for the Division of Foodborne Bacterial Diseases who can speak to that point.

Robert Tokes: Yes thank you very much for the question. It's true that there are longer term health effects after a number of foodborne infections. A well-known is the kidney damage that can follow e coli 0157. And it's called hemolytic-uremic syndrome or HUS. And even after the initial episode of HUS there can be longer term kidney damage.

After salmonella there have been descriptions of longer term health effects such as chronic arthritis affecting a few percentage of cases that can come and go and can be troublesome to some people.

This has not been particularly well studied but it has been documented after salmonella infections, campylobacter infections and other foodborne infections.

So we're quite sure that it can occur in a relatively small percentage of cases.

Michael Herndon: Okay. Thanks Dr. Tokes. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from (unintelligible) from ESE. Your line is open.

Man: Thank you. I have a question regarding Mexico. Can you rule out any states, you know, of the tomatoes? And also have you seen any people who have been sick with salmonella there or there are not people sick there and tomatoes didn't come from there.

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. I didn't quite get - sick where or illness where?

Man: In Mexico.

David Acheson: Oh. No. We've got no evidence of any illnesses in Mexico that we're aware of.

Ian Williams: This is Ian Williams from CDC - same from the CDC angle.

Man: What about the states? Have you ruled out any new states from Mexico?

David Acheson: We're working with Mexico on that currently. At this point the only state that's ruled out is Baja. That's on our list. The goal is obviously to work with the Mexican government to try to rule out other states as well. And that's part of an active bit of work right now as we speak.

Michael Herndon: Okay sir? Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Clayton Sandell from ABC News. Your line is open.

Clayton Sandell: Dr. Acheson you started to talk about this. I'm just curious if your message or advice to consumers or restaurants will change at this point. I mean, is it reasonable to assume that now you've identified these potential sources that tomatoes are safe to eat?

David Acheson: Faye addressed this in the opening comments. Maybe you were a little late getting on the call so I apologize. And then we had a little bit of a line - Faye do you just want to repeat your key messages there?

Faye Feldstein: Sure David. Thank you. Basically the information that we've provided today does not change our message to consumers or to retail and foodservice industries. That message is consistent.

Cherry tomatoes, grape tomatoes, tomatoes sold still on the vine are not associated with this outbreak. And the Red Roma, Red Plum and Red Round tomatoes from the geographic areas as listed on our website at this time are also not associated with the outbreak.

So we don't see - we see a consistent message for consumers.

Clayton Sandell: But are all tomatoes on the market clear I guess is the question? Or we don't know that?

Faye Feldstein: We have provided the information with respect to the geographic sources of tomatoes. We work diligently with both the tomato industry and the retail and foodservice industry and trade associations to make sure they are aware of the geographic sources of tomatoes that are not associated with the outbreak.

We suggest that if consumers are unsure that they contact their point of sale or point of consumption and ask about the source of the tomatoes there.

Clayton Sandell: Thank you.

David Acheson: Just to emphasize -- David Acheson here -- is that you - it is an important part for retailers to know their supply chain so that when consumers ask they know the answer and they know the correct answer.

And the message to consumers always where there's a possibility of foodborne illness if you're not sure don't take the risk.

Clayton Sandell: Okay.

Michael Herndon: Thank you David. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from (Tom Courage) from the Packer Newspaper. Your line is open.

(Tom Courage): Yes Dr. Acheson I was wondering if past salmonella traceback investigations have been helpful at all? And based on the evidence right now does it point more toward Florida or Mexico? Can you give us a feeling on the weight of the evidence so far?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. The - we looked at the past salmonella outbreaks to see if there are any patterns that would help us, you know, looking at the geographic distributions, what we know about the source, and they really haven't. We've look at those in great depth and compared them with the current outbreak and they really haven't helped us.

At this point no there is no preponderance of evidence once way or the other. The tracebacks have taken us in two different directions. And we are not putting any greater emphasis on one or the other. We're looking at the distribution chain in both.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Marilyn McGee from Cox News Service. Your line is open.

Marilyn McGee: Hi this is for Dr. Acheson. I went back over the conference call yesterday to make sure that my notes were correct. And this is exactly what you said yesterday word for word.

FDA has no information that the outbreak strain linked to tomatoes in the United States have been found in Mexico nor does the FDA know of any cases of human illness in Mexico linked to this outbreak.

So there's two points being made there. The first again is FDA has no information that the outbreak strain linked to tomatoes in the Unites States has been found in Mexico and second nor does FDA know of any cases of human illnesses in Mexico.

So today you're saying the second part of that sentence is still correct. There are no known cases of human illness in Mexico. But are you saying that the first part of the sentence - the first sentence has changed? That now you do have information linking the outbreak to tomatoes - to Mexico?

David Acheson: No. The statement that I made yesterday still stands. Let me try this again. The traceback begins with somebody getting sick in some state somewhere and I'm just going to pick Maryland because that's where I live.

Somebody in Maryland gets sick and the question that the local health department would put to that person is where did you buy your tomato? They bought them from a local supermarket. Go to the supermarket, where did you get them? Well we got them from such and such a supplier. You go to the supplier, where did you get them? Well we got from such and such a distributor. Go to the distributor, where did you get them?

And so it works its way down. I simplified it because generally when you go to any given supplier they'll say well I got them from four to five distributors. So it builds a huge spider's web.

What we are reporting today is that we have been able to confirm through our traceback two different potential links. One that takes us back to farms in Mexico. One that takes us back to farms in Florida.

It could be anywhere on that distribution chain where all these tomatoes were together at one point. It could be in a packing shed. It could be in a warehouse at some point where the contamination has occurred.

It does not mean definitively the contamination occurred on a farm in Mexico or on a farm in Florida. So the statement that I made yesterday still stands. We have no evidence that this salmonella strain is present in Mexico.

Marilyn McGee: But on the issue of the preponderance of evidence if tomatoes are grown in Mexico and frequently as I understand it they are then sent to Florida where they continue along this food chain. They're distributed and packaged and moved along.

Wouldn't more tomatoes - I mean, if you have a tomato that's grown in Mexico and a tomato that's grown in Florida it's more likely that the one from Mexico is going to be touched by more people or more processes in Florida isn't it?

I mean, not that many tomatoes that are grown in Florida get sent to Mexico to then be touched a lot. Isn't that correct - that most of the handling of a tomato would occur along the supply chain that occurs in Florida?

David Acheson: I don't think FDA has any evidence to support how much handling is happening whether it a tomato is grown in Mexico or Florida. I'm sure there are situations depending on the size of the farm and the packer and the number of suppliers and distribution channels. You could get equal handling or more handling on one than the other with some and vice versa.

So - and handling per se isn't the issue. It's was there some point where all these tomatoes were together. Bear in mind that we've got - now we've got illness in I believe 32 states. Is that right Ian? I'm assuming that that's right. Ian can correct me if I'm wrong.

Well 32 states and so you've got to - the assumption here is that at some point the tomatoes that went to those 32 states were all together in one more places. The key question is when they were all together in those one more places what went wrong because something went wrong, okay?

Marilyn McGee: There are no illnesses in Mexico and there are illnesses in the United States. But even with that you don't see that as - you don't take that as any particular evidence?

David Acheson: Well number one I don't where Mexico shipped - the tomatoes are shipping to the US. I don't where they're consumed domestically in Mexico. That's not information that I have. And to clarify what I said was that FDA is not aware of any illnesses in Mexico.

Michael Herndon: Thank you Marilyn. Next question please.

Coordinator: My next question is from Bob Ruth from CIDRAP News. Your line is open.

Bob Ruth: Hi. Thank you. Yeah - one foodborne disease investigator told me that in a previous investigation of salmonella linked to tomatoes it was helpful to trace in the original case control investigation it was helpful to trace the tomatoes that were eaten by the controls - the people that didn't get sick. And that that helped to narrow down the possible sources.

And I'm just wondering if you're doing that in this case or considering doing that.

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. No we have not done that. We don't routinely do that as part of our outbreak investigation. It's an intriguing suggestion. We've been focusing on trying to figure out where the contaminated tomatoes came from. But it is an intriguing possibility. But no we don't do that.

Bob Ruth: Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Thanks. Next question please.

Coordinator: Our next question is from Kent Depinta from The Takeaway. Your line is open.

Kent Depinta: Hi. Thanks for taking my call. So I'm just trying to get a little bit more handle - I know you don't want to belabor it - this geography point. But is it - so is there a giant distribution center somewhere where tomatoes from Mexico and tomatoes from Florida all mingled or, you know, does that make sense?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. I understand your question perfectly. That's what our inspectors are going to go figure out. There are distributions centers yes no question about that. We want to go and look at them, determine what their

processes are, and are they potential sites where the problem could've occurred.

Kent Depinta: Do you have any particular I mind that you've kind of narrowed it down to?

David Acheson: We have a list of - as I said we've got the pathway mapped out from the consumer back to these farms in the two different geographic locations. And we'll be sending inspectors out to those key points on that distribution chain to look at what's going on.

And as with the farms I'm not able to disclose how many there area, where they are, or their names.

Kent Depinta: Okay thank you.

Michael Herndon: Thanks. Debbie we only have time for two more questions, okay?

Coordinator: Okay thank you. Our next question is from Jose Lopez from the Mexican News Agency. Your line is open.

Jose Lopez: Yes Mr. Acheson could you tell us how many states are you planning to visit in Mexico next week and what kind of role would the Mexican authorities will be playing in these joint sessions.

David Acheson: I'm not able to say how many states we're going to visit. It's much like the earlier question well how many farms are we going to visit in Florida. I'm just not able to discuss that level of detail with an ongoing investigation.

The Mexican government has been incredibly cooperative with us. We're working very closely. The intent is that these investigations in Mexico will be done together and be done in a cooperative way.

Because clearly the Floridian regulators and the Mexican regulators are both as enthusiastic as each other to understand if there was a problem what it was and to correct it.

Jose Lopez: Can I follow up?

David Acheson: Sure.

Jose Lopez: The fact that you have not found any kinds of salmonellosis in Mexico makes it less likely that there is a contamination in any farm of the country?

David Acheson: Well FDA doesn't routinely look for salmonella in Mexico. That's not part of our mission and it's not the CDC's either I don't think to be looking for salmonella in Mexico.

Again to clarify that point FDA is not aware of any illnesses in Mexico.

Michael Herndon: Okay sir?

Jose Lopez: All right.

Michael Herndon: All right. Debbie the last question please.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our last question is from Tiffany Hsu from the Los Angeles Times. Your line is open.

Tiffany Hsu: Okay. I wanted to double check one thing. Since the number of cases is up to 552 does that make this the largest tomato borne salmonella outbreak of the 13 we've had?

Ian Williams: This is Ian Williams from CDC. I don't have the specific number in front of me but I believe it may be.

Tiffany Hsu: Okay. Because I know it's probably the largest for 2004. I just wanted to know.

Ian Williams: Yeah and I'm sorry I just don't have that number in front of me today. But I believe if it's not the largest it's one of the largest.

Tiffany Hsu: Okay thanks.

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. Just a follow up to that is from FDA's perspective whether it's larger or smaller people are getting sick. We get onto it just as quickly and try to solve the problem.

So just because it's large doesn't mean that we put more horses on it at FDA. We don't want anybody to get sick whether it's 1 or 500.

Michael Herndon: Okay Tiffany?

Tiffany Hsu: Yes.

Michael Herndon: All right. Ladies and gentlemen this concludes today's media teleconference. Now I'm going to ask - excuse me - I'm going to ask Dr. Acheson to provide a brief summary of his opening remarks so that we are giving you a clear message of what we're trying to say today.

David Acheson: This is David Acheson again. Thanks Mike. I'll make this very quick because I think we've gone over the key points many many times. The key message here is that we've completed the traceback for some of the tomatoes from point of purchase or consumption back to certain farms in Mexico and Florida.

We've mapped out the pathways between consumption and these farms. And we are sending investigators to the critical points on those pathways to try to determine what the problem was.

The current mission here is to narrow this further through these joint investigations that we're doing jointly with Florida and with Mexico, continue sampling and focusing on new tracebacks based on a new cluster that's emerging from Texas.

Those are essentially the key messages from FDA. So thanks Mike.

Michael Herndon: Thanks. Now ladies and gentlemen unless we have breaking news we will hold our next media update at the end of next week to provide an update on the status of the investigation.

Now a summary of today's call will be posted on our website - excuse me again - for reference over the weekend. Now the replay will be available in about an hour and can be listened to until June 23.

If you have any follow up questions please don't hesitate to call the respective agencies. And thank you and have a great day and a great weekend.

Coordinator: Thank you. This concludes today's presentation. You may disconnect at this time.

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