

Frontera CEO discusses company's role in listeria outbreak



On Nov. 21, **The Packer** conducted an exclusive question-and-answer interview with Will Steele, president and CEO of Frontera Produce, Edinburg, Texas, the marketer of the listeria-tainted cantaloupes shipped by Jensen Farms, Holly, Colo.

Q1. Please explain Frontera Produce's business relationship with Jensen Farms.

Our role was that of a marketing agent, providing our expertise to find buyers and manage the sales paperwork and logistics for cantaloupe grown and packed by Jensen Farms. We did not purchase or take possession of the cantaloupe; rather we provided marketing services to Jensen Farms on a commission basis. As independent growers, the Jensens also sold directly to some customers, mostly locally.

As part of our marketing services, we utilized our inventory control system in which every pallet of Jensen Farms cantaloupe marketed by Frontera was remotely entered into our database when it was harvested and shipped. This proved to be important in tracking the product to customers in our database because we had records of where each pallet came from and where Jensen Farms shipped it.



Steele

Q2. How did the Sept. 14 Jensen Farms cantaloupe recall unfold from Frontera's role as a fresh produce marketer?

Things happened quickly after that first call from health authorities. But before I get into the details, let me first strongly encourage all produce companies to test their recall plans to be sure that they can take immediate action if they are ever in a situation similar to what we faced. Our ability to respond quickly assisted in the investigation and may have prevented additional illnesses.

Here is how it all unfolded from our perspective:

On Thursday, Sept. 8, Colorado state health authorities specifically requested shipment records for cantaloupe grown in the Rocky Ford region as part of an investigation into an outbreak of listeria illnesses. We were also told at that point that the investigation included possible listeria sources other

than cantaloupe. Because we had electronically integrated the farm's inventory records with our purchase order records, we were able to quickly provide state officials with the customer list and initial shipping destinations for the Jensen Farms' cantaloupe for which we were the marketer.

On Monday, Sept. 12, prior to pinpointing the exact source, Colorado state health officials issued a general consumer warning to not eat cantaloupe from the entire Rocky Ford region. We discussed this announcement with Jensen Farms that day and, as a precautionary measure, the Jensens stopped harvesting and selling cantaloupes because of the general warning. Frontera assisted Jensen Farms in issuing a voluntary market withdrawal by contacting customers in our database and asking that they remove the product from commerce and hold it until Colorado state officials could provide more information. We contacted customers by phone that same night (Sept. 12) and Tuesday morning (Sept. 13). These customers included wholesale operations that resell the product as well as retail distribution centers that ship to individual stores.

Even before Jensen Farms was asked and agreed to issue its voluntary recall, Frontera had already identified the companies to which we marketed the Jensen Farms cantaloupe, supplied that information to health authorities, and contacted those customers. While we had no way of knowing the individual stores or final point of sale of the cantaloupes, we took action on the information we did have.

On Wednesday, Sept. 14, Jensen Farms issued a recall. In addition to the public notification via Jensen Farms' news release, Frontera again contacted customers in our database who had received Jensen Farms cantaloupe and asked that they destroy any product in their possession and also instruct their customers to do the same.

Throughout this situation, we acted as quickly as we could and in the best interest of public health, including tracking the cantaloupe to customers in our database and using multiple communications efforts to reach those customers. Still, many people have been impacted by this terrible situation, and we are deeply saddened by it.

Q3. How did traceability play into this particular recall?

Traceability was critical in assisting state health officials to quickly identify the potential contamination vehicle. Within hours of speaking with the Colorado Department of Health and the Environment, we were able to provide officials with the shipping destination of each pallet of cantaloupe marketed from Jensen Farms. This information, in turn, was helpful in the public health investigation.

Frontera Produce provided the infrastructure for the pallet-level traceability that was used in this situation. We provided computers and software so that both Jensen Farms and Frontera Produce could access the farm's inventory and tracking records for the product that we marketed. This allowed the Jensens to assign tags to each pallet coming in from the field, scan those tags at shipping, and assign them to the customers and direct shipping destinations for tracking purposes.

Q4. What are Frontera Produce's food safety requirements and traceability systems? Have any changed since this outbreak?

In the case of Jensen Farms, our traceability system was able to track every pallet of cantaloupe that we marketed, by integrating the farm's harvest and shipping information with our sales database. Frontera is committed to the industry-wide Produce Traceability Initiative, which encourages all companies along the supply chain to capture and read traceability data. By integrating this information, we were able to capture the traceability data from the farm to the direct shipping point.

Regarding our food safety requirements, we require that all suppliers commit to following federal government food safety guidelines appropriate to their individual operations. These may include: FDA's Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables, Good Agricultural Practices and Good Manufacturing Practices. Suppliers' packing facilities and growing fields are required to undergo and pass third-party audits. Finally, since 2009, we have been working with all our growers to move to third-party audits that comply with the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI). Our implementation timetable is for all of the produce we market to be 100% GFSI compliant by the middle of next year, and we are on track to meet that goal.

In the wake of this experience, we are examining, among other things, the role of audits. Third-party audits are an important and useful tool, but they are obviously not fail-safe. Audits provide baseline information on conditions at the time they are conducted. So we are looking at possible changes that might further enhance food safety. One area of focus is whether additional steps are needed to validate the audit findings regarding food safety protocols that are in place. Validation could be in the form of a follow-up audit, or perhaps other measures that will help provide additional assurance of food safety compliance.

This is an industry-wide issue that all of us must deal with, so we are also talking with others in the produce industry and sharing our experience so that we can further our collective knowledge and understanding.

Q5. Are your standards/GAP guidelines for Jensen Farms the same as other domestic and imported cantaloupe suppliers? All your suppliers?

Yes. Suppliers of all our products, domestically-grown or imported, must adhere to the same FDA produce-specific guidelines and pass third-party audits. Furthermore, all suppliers are moving toward GFSI-compliant auditing schemes, such as SQF and Global GAP.

Q6. How involved is Frontera with suppliers' growing practices?

In most cases, where we own or are in a partnership with the grower, Frontera is intimately involved in every aspect of the growing practices. In cases where we act only as the marketing agent, as was the case with Jensen Farms, we are not directly involved in the specific growing practices, although, like all of our suppliers, they do commit to following Good Agricultural Practices. These suppliers may also keep us informed as to how the crop is progressing so that we know when product will be available for sale and shipping, but we do not dictate practices. In these cases, we rely upon third-party audits to verify that farms from which we source product comply with acceptable food safety practices.

Q7. What's your view on the lawsuits that have named Frontera as a defendant?

First, it is important to remember that the greatest tragedy in all of this is the human one. And it is this human tragedy that drives us to continue to analyze every aspect of this unprecedented event in an attempt to prevent it from ever happening again.

That there is litigation is not surprising; almost anytime there is an injury, a lawsuit will follow. In fact, it is to be expected. We have seen this again and again, where even companies that never saw or touched the product were drawn into litigation based on association or something other than actual wrong-doing. It is an unfortunate reality.

Q8. One attorney said he expects Frontera to be forced into chapter 7 liquidation. Is that valid?

From what I've read, these comments are part of much unfounded speculation that, unfortunately, is also not surprising in these cases. I will repeat what I have said before. I have no intention of engaging in such speculation. What's important to know is that all of us, including myself and all of the dedicated people who work with me, look forward to serving our customers for many years to come.

Q9. Does this cantaloupe outbreak make Frontera reassess its business model or other practices?

This is an unprecedented event in the produce industry. The only responsible thing to do in a situation like this is to review everything. But there has never been an outbreak quite like this. There is no road map to show us which way to go. So we are talking with academics, scientists and globally-recognized auditing bodies, such as NSF Agriculture, about other options to validate our food safety requirements. We also continue to be involved with both the Produce Marketing Association and United Fresh Produce Association and their industry-wide traceability initiative. And we are working with auditing standards such as SQF and have helped develop and incorporate produce-specific auditing metrics. We are committed to evaluating all options and acting in a leadership role in the effort to enhance food safety.

Q10. What are Frontera's plans for sourcing Rocky Ford cantaloupes next season?

It is important to remember that this is not about Rocky Ford cantaloupes. According to everything we're aware of, it is about the unusual presence of listeria in one packing facility. Researchers and health officials are still trying to figure out how, if at all, this could change food safety protocols and consumer advice. In addition, Colorado Commissioner of Agriculture John Salazar is working with cantaloupe growers in his state to reinforce food safety protocols, and we fully support those efforts. At this point, we have made no specific plans for next summer.

Q11. What are the general future plans for Frontera?

We will move ahead with confidence in serving our customers, and a continuing commitment to strengthen the industry's food safety and traceability efforts.

Our traceability system is one of the most sophisticated in the industry, and under very trying circumstances, it helped us quickly notify customers, enabling the removal of potentially contaminated

product from the marketplace. We are one of the first companies to introduce item-level traceability, recently launching it for pineapples. We will continue to aggressively pursue food safety and traceability improvements through our involvement in the Produce Marketing Association, United Fresh Produce Association and auditing organizations. I will continue to invest in our people, our products, and our customers.

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