

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Rutgers survey examines public response to the 2008 *Salmonella* Saintpaul outbreak associated with tomatoes and peppers**

New Brunswick, N.J. — A new report, released today, outlines the findings of Rutgers Food Policy Institute (FPI) researchers who examined public perceptions of the 2008 *Salmonella* Saintpaul outbreak, the largest foodborne illness outbreak in the United States in over a decade.

The 2008 *Salmonella* Saintpaul outbreak sickened more than 1,400 individuals in 43 states. The outbreak was originally believed to have been caused by the consumption of certain types of fresh tomatoes, but was ultimately linked to eating fresh jalapeño and serrano peppers from Mexico. In an effort to prevent additional illnesses, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a series of advisories to consumers to avoid eating certain types of tomatoes and peppers. Every year, FDA issues dozens of food-related recalls, withdrawals and advisories, but very few are as large or complex as the warning about this outbreak. During the three months of the outbreak, these advisories changed as new information became available. The substantial media attention and the complexity of the messages from the government provided an opportunity for researchers at FPI to study the public's understanding of the FDA's advisories and other communications. The results of this study were published today on FPI's web site, <http://foodpolicy.rutgers.edu>.

“We examined both the successes and the failures of the communication about this very large and complex recall,” said Dr. Cara Cuite, research associate at FPI and lead author on the report, entitled “Public Response to the *Salmonella* Saintpaul Outbreak of 2008.” “This research is especially timely in light of the growing number of recalls as a result of the *Salmonella* outbreak associated with peanut butter and peanut paste. Our results suggest that consumers may have a hard time taking in many details about these types of food-borne problems. Misunderstanding or ignoring the advice to avoid eating potentially contaminated products could lead to a significant number of unnecessary illnesses.”

The survey found that awareness of the *Salmonella* outbreak this summer was high, but the specifics were less well understood. The researchers found that while almost all respondents (93 percent) were aware that tomatoes were believed to be the source of the illness, only 68 percent were aware of that peppers were also associated with the outbreak. The majority of respondents (66 percent) first heard about the advisory on television, and a small minority (8 percent) first heard about it from restaurants and retailers. There was significant uncertainty about the specifics of the warning, as almost half of those aware of the tomato warning (48 percent) indicated that they were not certain which types of tomatoes were considered unsafe to consume.

FDA had advised Americans that they did not need to avoid all tomatoes, and 64 percent of those aware of the warning and who ate tomatoes prior to the warning reported that they continued to eat tomatoes during the advisory. However, not everyone followed the FDA's advice. Eleven percent of all respondents reported knowingly eating the types of tomatoes that FDA had warned them not to eat. The most common reasons given for eating these tomatoes were the belief that eating the tomatoes would not cause illness; a distrust of the government and/or media; the belief that stores wouldn't sell unsafe products; and that consumers had done something to the tomatoes to make them safe (such as washing or cooking them, which were not actions recommended by FDA).

The tomato warning had been lifted by the time FPI researchers conducted the phone interviews for this report. Most respondents were aware of this, with two-thirds (66 percent) indicating that they believed the tomato warning had been lifted. However, 33 percent indicated that they were not aware that the warning had ended, making it is clear that the message that tomatoes were once again considered safe to eat had not reached all consumers. Finally, nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of those who had heard of the warning and were tomato consumers before the outbreak reported that they had eaten tomatoes since the warning had been lifted.

These results are based on a nationally representative sample of 1,101 Americans, interviewed by telephone from August 4 to September 24, 2008. The results of this survey provide insight into the level of consumer awareness and knowledge of the advisory, including whether Americans were aware of the outbreak and where they first heard about it; what consumers did in response to the outbreak; whether Americans knew the tomato warning had been lifted; and whether Americans returned to consuming tomatoes after the warning was lifted.

The authors of the study are Cara L. Cuite, Scott D. Schefske, Elizabeth M. Randolph, Neal H. Hooker, Mary L. Nucci and William K. Hallman, all researchers at FPI. The study was funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

FPI is a research unit of Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. The institute addresses important emerging food policy issues and supports public and private decision makers who shape aspects of the food system within which government, agriculture, industry and the consumer interact.

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