

Fear in Colo. town at heart of Listeria outbreak

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Eric Jensen walks a field with rotting cantaloupes on the Jensen Farms near Holly, Colo., on Wednesday, Sept. 28, 2011. Eric and his brother Ryan own Jensen Farms that has been identified as the source of the national listeria outbreak that has killed more than a dozen people so far. (AP Photo/Ed Andrieski)

(AP) -- Eric Jensen surveys his dusty cantaloupe field and seems equally stunned and puzzled at the fate that has befallen his crop: row upon row of melons rotting on the vine.

Jensen is the co-owner of the Colorado farm where health officials say a national listeria outbreak originated, making his withering fields the epicenter of a food scare that has sickened dozens of people from Wyoming to Maryland and caused 16 deaths.

The farm has recalled more than 300,000 cases of cantaloupes and on Thursday three states - Indiana, Louisiana and Wisconsin - were added to the recall list. Spokeswoman Amy Philpott said that trucking records show that cantaloupes originally intended for other locations ended up in those states but that the buyers were notified as part of the original Sept. 14 recall.

Jensen has no idea how his cantaloupes became infected, and neither do the Food and Drug Administration investigators who have intermittently been in this town of 800 people near the Kansas border since the outbreak started earlier this month.

Regardless of how it happened, the situation has left the town and farm reeling and in fear. Jensen had to quit growing and shipping cantaloupes after the outbreak was discovered - a staggering blow to a region where cantaloupe has always been a proud local tradition.

Until the listeria infections started showing up, Holly's field workers would bring melons into town to share, just as they have for generations. And it wasn't uncommon for Holly residents to stop by Jensen Farms to buy freshly picked cantaloupe. Now, not even the local grocery store has any of the fruit.

No one in Holly has been sickened, but people are frightened by the prospect of contracting listeria. The bacteria can have an incubation period of a month or more, and it principally affects the elderly and those with compromised immune systems.

"I ate that cantaloupe, and I gave some of it to my 97-year-old mother," said Wanda Watson, co-owner of the Tasty House Cafe. "I'm watching her real close. It's scary because it could be up to two months before you get sick."

Sherri McGarry, a senior adviser in the FDA's Office of Foods, said the agency is looking at the farm's water supply and the possibility that animals wandered into Jensen Farms' fields, among other things, in trying to figure out how the cantaloupes became contaminated. Listeria bacteria grow in moist, muddy conditions and are often carried by animals.

The water supply for farms in the Holly area comes from wells and irrigation ditches that tap the nearby Arkansas River. There's no shortage of thoughts around town about the potential causes.

"Well water? I doubt it. Ditch water? Well, there's some probability, but it's low," said Jim Cline, a retired construction worker. "Animal intrusion? Well, OK, what kind of animal? Deer? Coons? Coyotes? What kind of animal wants to get into a melon field?"

At Jensen Farms, workers have stopped picking cantaloupes because of a recall of its product. There's no need to irrigate the crop anymore, and the melons are drying up in the rock-hard fields. As Eric Jensen surveyed his lost crop, workers ripped up plastic that's laid down in rows to help the cantaloupe grow.

He could not discuss the outbreak, citing a likely raft of pending litigation.

"There are a lot of things I'd like to say right now, but now is not the time," Jensen said.

It's the latest blow to Holly, a town that has seen its share of hard times.

In late 2006, Holly was pummeled by a blizzard that cut off the town from the outside world so badly that helicopters had to drop feed to stranded cattle. Just as people were digging out of the blizzard, a tornado

blasted through Holly, killing three people and destroying and damaging dozens of homes.

The Sept. 10 recall of Jensen Farms' cantaloupes came toward the end of a harvesting season made difficult by a severe drought that has rendered swaths of southeast Colorado, Kansas, Texas and Oklahoma federal disaster areas.

Residents talk about conditions so dry that some corn stalks have no ears of corn on them. Yields in wheat fields - usually between 40 to 50 bushels an acre - have dropped to about 20.

"We just haven't had any luck around here," said Watson.

Holly is about a 90-minute drive from the town of Rocky Ford, home to Colorado's revered cantaloupe growing region. Cantaloupes from the Arkansas River Valley are prized for their sweetness and are such a big deal that farms like Jensen's - 70 miles away - carry the brand name "Rocky Ford Cantaloupe."

The listeria scare has some residents wondering about the future for their Rocky Ford brand of cantaloupe - and cantaloupe farming in Colorado for that matter. They're hopeful this outbreak eventually will fade from the public's memory, like others involving spinach or ground meat contaminated by E. coli bacteria or salmonella.

"You think beef recalls, you think spinach in California," said Michael Daskam, who works in the local soil conservation office. "But heck, I was eating spinach and beef right after."

The same goes for locally grown cantaloupe.

"I'm not afraid of eating cantaloupe. I'd eat one right now," Holly Mayor

Viola Welcher said. "We've all eaten it and no one in our area has gotten sick."

More information:

<http://www.cdc.gov/listeria/index.html>

<http://1.usa.gov/rr2j1d>

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