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Florida tomato industry in 'complete collapse'

Tue Jun 10, 2008 10:17am EDT

By Jane Sutton

MIAMI (Reuters) - Florida's tomato industry is in "complete collapse" and \$40 million worth of tomatoes will rot unless federal regulators quickly trace the source of a salmonella outbreak and clear the state's produce, an industry official said on Tuesday.

"We probably have \$40 million worth of product we can't sell. We've had to stop packing, stop picking," said Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Saturday warned U.S. consumers that the outbreak was linked to eating certain raw red plum, red Roma, and red round tomatoes, and products containing these tomatoes. Several major restaurant and grocery chains have stopped selling those varieties.

"It fundamentally shut down the industry," he said. "The stuff that should have been harvested over the weekend won't survive more than another day or so. The stuff we have in storage is getting riper every minute and at some point it will have to be disposed of."

Florida is the largest tomato-producing state, with a crop valued at \$500 million to \$700 million annually, he said. The state produces more than 90 percent of the nation's tomatoes this time of year, Brown said.

The FDA has said that it is safe to eat cherry tomatoes, grape tomatoes and tomatoes sold with the vine still attached. But those varieties account for only a tiny portion of the industry, Brown said.

The FDA has said it does not know where the contaminated tomatoes originated.

The infections have struck most often in New Mexico and Texas.

"We're very interested in seeing the FDA bring resolution to this and also would like to express concern for those who've fallen ill," Brown told Reuters.

The FDA said there had been 145 reported cases as of Saturday, including at least 23 hospitalizations, related to the outbreak since mid-April. The infections were caused by Salmonella Saintpaul, an uncommon type of the bacteria.

Salmonella bacteria are frequently responsible for food-borne illnesses. Symptoms generally appear within 12 to 72 hours after eating infected food and include fever, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain.

(Editing by Jim Loney and Matthew Lewis)

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