

## Local news

# Growers fear berry backlash

6-29-90

Agriculture

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WASHINGTON — Standing behind a table loaded with baskets of ripe Watsonville strawberries Friday, Rep. Sam Farr sought to calm fears about the safety of the fruit.

The strawberry industry, a \$600 million enterprise in the Carmel Democrat's Central Coast district, has been under siege in recent weeks as health officials try to identify the source of a parasite infection that made hundreds of people sick in Texas and 10 other states. Growers received good news Thursday when an advisory by the Texas Health Department against eating strawberries was lifted.

Nevertheless, growers are worried by signs the public is shunning strawberries because of the scare. So Farr and Rep. Andrea Seastrand, R-San Luis Obispo, conducted a press conference to ensure no further damage is done to the strawberry industry as health officials continue searching for the cause of the cyclospora parasite infection.

"They have found no linkage be-

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'They have found no linkage between the outbreak in Houston and strawberries.'

— Rep. Sam Farr, eating a berry

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tween the outbreak in Houston and strawberries," said Farr, sampling one of the fat berries before him. "And the infection has been in other cities as well, and in many states, they have never even suggested a link with strawberries."

Farr on Thursday pressed David Kessler, head of the Food and Drug Administration, to tell the public that no direct link between cyclospora and strawberries have been established. While the agency was not on hand for the press conference, the FDA confirmed Farr's report of a phone conversation in which Kessler's deputy, Mary Pendergast, said there has been no finding to date by the FDA of contaminated strawberries.

Still, the FDA hasn't yet isolated a

cause. And until it does, officials say nothing can be ruled out.

But neither has the FDA advised people to avoid any types of food, said FDA spokesman Brad Stone.

"We have said we share their concern that no product is prematurely cited as the cause," Stone said. "It's our intention, when there is more definitive evidence, to let people know what is likely the source of the problem, and what is not likely the source."

Unfortunately, Seastrand said, one of her growers "is having his strawberries rot in the fields right now. The Eastern markets have closed up. It's very sad to see."

Farr said prime picking time in his district north of Seastrand's is just beginning, so growers haven't been much

affected yet. But a scare causing a boycott could wipe out some growers in just 10 days' time.

"The Fourth of July is prime strawberry selling season," Farr said. "The week leading up to the holiday is to the sale of strawberries what Valentine's Day is to the floral industry. So the jury is still out. It depends on what happens in the next two weeks."

Thomas Stenzel, president of the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, noted that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found no evidence of the parasite in California strawberry fields. Nor have there been any illnesses in California, leading him to believe that if strawberries are somehow linked to infection in other states, the berries were contaminated when they were prepared.

For now, that's just speculation. But Farr and Seastrand apparently convinced their immediate audience of reporters, staffers, tourists and others that strawberries are safe: The onlookers generously helped themselves to the plump strawberries following the news conference.