

# Strawberry industry gathers experts

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WATSONVILLE — The California strawberry industry took the first step Friday to learn more about a little-known parasite disease — cyclospora.

The California Strawberry Commission convened a panel of eight experts to determine the source of the disease that has caused dozens of illnesses in Canada and Texas.

Houston health officials said Thursday that tainted California strawberries are almost certainly the source of the illness. The parasite causes diarrhea, stomach cramps, nausea, fatigue and fever.

The panel is being led by Dr. Charles Sterling of the University of Arizona. He is being assisted by experts from universities, the Department of Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Agriculture.

One expert on the panel, Dr. Bradley Connor of Cornell University, appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America" Friday to discuss the cyclospora outbreak. He has studied the rare parasite in Nepal for the past eight years.

Not enough scientific data is known, he said, to pinpoint strawberries as the

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— Stuart Richardson, Department of Health Services

source.

He cited 40 reported cases at Cornell University in New York, but 10 of those were of non-strawberry origin.

“The goal of this panel is to resolve the question (source) and resolve it quickly,” he said.

Teresa Thorne, spokeswoman for the strawberry trade group based in Watsonville, said “we are confident that our strawberries are safe and hope to prove that with an independent investigative panel.”

Although Houston health officials believe they have confirmed a statistical linkage between California strawberries and cyclospora, state health officials reported that testing of soil, water and strawberries in Watsonville, Salinas and

Monterey remain negative.

“Health officials are examining all possible causes, everything from the place of origin to how food was prepared and served,” said Stuart Richardson, chief of the Department’s Food and Drug branch. “California is the largest consumer of California strawberries, and there is no evidence of any outbreak in the state.”

James Waddell, acting chief of the Department of Health Service’s Food Safety Section, also said no California samples of strawberries or water have tested positive for the parasite.

“We’ve looked at farms as far south as Oxnard and on up to Watsonville,” he said. “We’ve not been able to trace it (cyclospora) to anything.”