

## Sebring News Sun: Reduce the federal deficit and strengthen the dollar.

Farmers concerned over food safety and fair competition

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SEBRING -- A small group of concerned tomato growers traveled from as far as Hillsborough, Lee and Manatee counties for an opportunity to talk with Congressman Tim Mahoney (D-Stuart) at the Highlands Agri-Civic Center Saturday morning. Mahoney is the only Florida representative on the House Agriculture Committee, and the growers wanted him to know just how difficult and expensive it is to get their product raised and brought to market. This has been the most expensive year putting crops in, he was told.

With fuel costs still high many small, independent growers, and even larger farms, are having trouble maintaining a healthy profit margin.

The recent tomato scare, brought about during an outbreak of salmonella poisoning -- which for a time was blamed on tomatoes -- cost the industry nationally, \$300 to \$400 million the growers said. Florida was especially hard hit because the outbreak timed with the harvest. It was the kind of hit, the growers made clear, that could put a struggling business under.

While there is a possibility the Congress might compensate growers for their losses, Mahoney made it clear it was not a sure thing -- the issue in question being whether taxpayers should bail out private growers.

What has the growers most upset, however, is that most American farms have put safety measures into place, including sophisticated tracking systems should problems develop, but that those systems were not used by the regulatory agencies to discover the culprit in the salmonella case. Instead, a blanket warning was issued affecting every tomato grower in the country, and the tomato market is still 30 percent off, even after Mexican peppers were found to be at fault.

"I don't know of many farmers that can't track each box of tomatoes," Gene McAvoy said. McAvoy is the regional vegetable extension agent, working out of Hendry County.

Yet, he said the investigators looking into the outbreak used what he characterized as the old-fashioned method of investigation -- starting at the patient and tracing back to the restaurant, the supplier and finally the farm.

Charles Stump, a tomato grower from Ruskin, said, "We don't get anything from safety (and the money we invest in it). From day one of the outbreak in New Mexico, tomato production was shut down in Florida."

Stump wanted to know what the point of a tracking system was, if it isn't used.

He also pointed out, with the other growers quickly agreeing, that American regulations were costly enough to make it difficult to compete.

Imported produce from overseas, where regulations are often lax or don't exist at all, create an unfair advantage at the market place, and more importantly puts the consumer at risk.

In answer, Mahoney said he is working with other congressmen, including Adam Putnam (R-Bartow), to come up with new legislation to protect both American farmers and consumers. He urged the growers to help write that legislation.

"We allow business with overseas growers without the same values," Mahoney said. "This is wrong. If they are going to sell into our market, they should have to grow their product to our standards and do it at their own cost."

Mahoney reported that the inspection system for incoming produce is in a state of failure.

"Less than 1/2 of 1 percent of produce coming in from Mexico is inspected," he said. "A sample is taken and the truck allowed to go. If they find a problem, they try to catch up to the truck."

Part of this situation, he added, has an historical background. Thirty years ago agricultural inspections were taken from the department of agriculture and divided into a patchwork system. Then after 2001, the department of Homeland Security took over. That meant, however, that inspections were more geared to look for terrorists or deadly materials. The inspectors aren't trained tell a good tomato from a bad one.

Now the inspection system is so broken, Mahoney said, the Department of Agriculture doesn't want it back.

The growers indicated cures would have to include consistency -- all growers held to the same standards -- and some kind of protection against overseas production. Not so much in the form of tariffs, but at least equal vigor in ensuring the safety of imported food. The idea of federal inspectors being stationed overseas and inspecting product before it is sent here is one suggestion.

As to agriculture's future in Florida -- Mahoney was more optimistic than the growers. He said an important opportunity loomed with the move to fuels blended with agricultural products, not just from corn but sugar cane and citrus pulp and rind leftovers.

This year, he said, America produced 9 and 1/2 billion gallons of alternate fuel, by 2033 that amount is expected to increase to 26 billion gallons.