

FDA, agricultural industry discuss how to work together

BY MARA KNAUB
SUN STAFF WRITER

The role of Yuma agricultural growers is to feed the nation. The role of the Food and Drug Administration is to protect public health.

When food contamination outbreaks occur, the FDA issues warnings against eating the affected produce item which deeply impacts the agricultural industry.

To find out how growers and the federal agency can better work together, an AgTechX Food Safety event featured a panel on the regulatory aspect with Victor Smith, president and CEO of JV Smith Companies, Barbara Cassens, director for the Office of Partnerships, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and Tom Sidebottom, research scientist and consultant and former lab director with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

AgTechX, an event dedicated to innovations in food safety technology, was held Feb. 2 in Yuma. The conference was hosted by the Western Growers Center for Innovation and Technology, Center for Produce Safety and Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture.

Both Sidebottom and



A WORKER WITH SUNRISE Packing cuts a Dulcinea Farms extra sweet cantaloupe in a field in the Yuma Valley in this 2019 photo.

Cassens were involved in the 2006 E. coli outbreak linked to spinach. With five deaths, it was the deadliest outbreak in U.S. history. The government confirmed 199 illnesses in 26 states and 102 hospitalizations, with 31 cases of hemolytic uremic syndrome, a severe infection with kidney failure and significant mortality.

The 2006 outbreak was the first time that the FDA issued a "Do Not Eat" warning, which received massive

media coverage.

Sidebottom, who worked at the FDA for more than 33 years, described it as a "scary time." However, he also saw it as an opportunity to share science and open the door to transparency and trust.

Until then, the government expected field samples to go to the lab. In that outbreak, the lab went to the field samples. The mobile lab gave FDA investigators the opportunity to work with

and get to know the agricultural community.

This interaction opened the door to solving problems in a different way and to reexamine the "toolkit," Sidebottom said. "Is it the right toolkit and are they the right tools in the box?"

Cassens, who appeared virtually, sees a need for creative solutions to complicated problems. "Think beyond the box, there is no box," she said. "We can regulate the hell out of it, but what are



PHOTO BY MARA KNAUB/YUMA SUN

TOM SIDEBOTTOM, research scientist and consultant and former lab director with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, talks at the AgTechX Food Safety event held Feb. 2.

the creative solutions that we need to do it?"

In particular, the new emphasis is on preventing outbreaks, not reacting to them. Sidebottom has seen a huge improvement in this effort since 2006. Mitigation steps include washing and rinsing and changes in

harvesting.

Communication between the ag industry and the agency also opened up after the outbreak. Sidebottom said that the ag industry was more willing to talk to the agency about what's going on and bring attention to

SFF AGTECH/B2



Always friendly. Always clean.

COCOPAH

CASINO & RESORT

Fun is just around the corner!

AmEx to offer debit card that will accrue rewards points

BY KEN SWEET
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK – American Express on Tuesday launched a checking account that comes with a debit card that will allow its customers to accrue its popular Membership Rewards points the same way they do on its credit and charge cards.

It's a notable move for AmEx and the banking industry in general, since debit cards that offered airline miles or rewards went basically extinct after the passage of the Dodd-Frank Act following the Great Recession. Currently only a handful of small banks and credit unions offer cash back or rewards for debit card purchases.

AmEx's checking account will come with a debit card and an annual interest yield of 0.5%. The

debit card will give account holders one Membership Reward point for every \$2 they spend on purchases. Those points can be pooled with the Membership Rewards points the cardmember might already be already earning on a credit card.

"Our customers are happy with the benefits and rewards they get from our products, so we have been very interested in finding ways to have a broader relationship with our members," said Eva Reda, executive vice president and general manager of consumer banking products at AmEx, in an interview.

The new checking account will only be available for existing AmEx credit card holders presently, the company said.

It used to be common for large banks to offer checking accounts that

gave cash back for rewards for debit card purchases. JPMorgan Chase had a debit card that gave Mileage Plus points on United Airlines in the early 2000s, for example.

That came to a crashing halt after the enactment of the Durbin Amendment, a part of the Dodd-Frank Act passed in 2010 after the Great Recession. The Durbin Amendment capped the amount of money banks and payment processors could charge merchants for debit-card transactions. It was a major win for merchants at the time, who have long complained about the fees they were paying for routine debit-card purchases.

Banks, who were using the fees they were earning from debit-card purchases to partly fuel rewards programs, quickly

ended these programs.

New York-based American Express is not subject to the Durbin Amendment – it operates its own closed system where AmEx operates as both the bank and payment processor. Discover Financial also offers rewards on a checking account and operates a "closed loop" system similar to AmEx.

AmEx has jumped into other consumer banking products over the years, with various degrees of success. The company launched an online-only savings account more than a decade ago, which became popular for the high interest it would pay out to deposit holders. The company also offers prepaid debit cards as well as certificates of deposit.

The new debit card will run on the MoneyPass



MARK LENNIHAN

THIS JAN. 21, 2015, file photo, shows a sign for American Express outside a New York business. American Express launched its own checking account product on Tuesday, Feb. 8, 2022, a product that will allow its customers to accrue its popular Membership Rewards points the same way they do on its credit and charge cards.

ATM network, the company said, to allow fee-free withdrawals at eligible ATMs. There will be no monthly maintenance fees. The accounts will not allow a customer to

go into a negative account balance as well.

Ken Sweet covers banking and consumer financial issues for The Associated Press. Follow him on Twitter at @kensweet.

AGTECH

FROM PAGE B1

issues ahead of the problem. And sharing data from the lab is "incredibly helpful," he added.

Cassens agreed. "Information and data is crucial, but at the end of the day, if we can't talk, if we can't have a relationship, the data doesn't matter. It's all about the relationship, that's how we get things done," she said.

Smith commented on the relationship shift between the ag industry and the FDA. He said the agency was "very helpful as opposed to coming in and trying to find evidence and go prosecute us or do something nasty to us. From that standpoint, thank you."

In examining what other changes could improve food safety, Sidebottom noted that the unintended consequences of trying to prevent outbreaks is adding more and more steps, which costs a lot of money, but no one talks about taking away steps.

As an example, he pointed to testing field samples in an effort to find contamination. He questioned the value of all this testing when 95%



PHOTO BY MARA KNAUB/YUMA SUN

THE AGTECHX Food Safety event on Feb. 2 features a panel on the regulatory aspect with Victor Smith (left), president and CEO of JV Smith Companies, and Tom Sidebottom (right), research scientist and consultant and former lab director with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and Barbara Cassens, director for the Office of Partnerships, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, who appeared virtually.

of all tests are negative. He asked whether growers need to keep testing at the same frequency and if it can be adapted.

A better solution, he added, would be to stop spending money on so much testing and invest it in something that results in higher confidence and better results.

Cassens explained that the FDA invested \$118 million last year on state and local associations, with a quarter on contracts and the rest

on grants. The goal is to promote public safety and public health and find out what's working and what's not working.

Among the agency's collaborators is the National Institute of Standards and Technology, which promotes U.S. innovation and industrial competitiveness by advancing science, standards and technology.

In the end, Cassens believes that it comes back to relationships. For example, NIST is not connected to



BARBARA CASSENS, director for the Office of Partnerships, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, appears virtually at the AgTechX Food Safety event on Feb. 2.

food safety, however, it explores quality systems and process improvements, and that knowledge, collectively with knowledge from others in the industry, could lead to better solutions.

Smith agreed, noting that the more that is known about food contamination transmission, the better. The solution would be to "get more exacting science to direct us in the right way" so the ag industry could "start eliminating things that at this point are senseless" and have "minute impact."

Cassens suggested working with multiple sources and not relying solely on the government. "The government will not solve the problem. They can regulate

and enforce, but they won't solve it. So the issue is how do we solve it together?"

It requires bringing the regulatory and science sides together, much like the right and left sides of the brain, Sidebottom said. He noted that part of the challenge inside the FDA is that science might come up with great ideas, but the policy or enforcement people won't accept it.

Cassens, who worked in the research and development industry for 10 years, acknowledged a "need to talk" and bring all the minds in the room together to come up with creative solutions.

To that end, Western Growers at the event introduced the AgTechX Food

Safety Cohort, a global group of innovators specializing in prevention technologies and rapid diagnostics who will receive exclusive resources to help them launch and scale their projects.

Sidebottom also noted that the FDA is very reactive, instead of proactive. He pointed out that the "field is not a sterile environment" and questioned strict regulations. "That's where I see a need for change," he said.

One law Cassens would like to see changed is the ability of the FDA to share more information. The ag industry has complained that the FDA does not move quick enough to engage the industry when investigating an outbreak.

The agency spends weeks tracking and performing entomology before they contact the grower. At that point, the agency will usually tell the grower that a press release is going out that night and ask them what they're going to do about the outbreak.

It requires bringing "both sides of the same coin together," Sidebottom reiterated.

Smith agreed on the need for more cooperation and interaction between the ag industry, the agency. "If we could strive for that, and remind ourselves, it goes both ways."