Trump administration shields Taylor Farms and Taco Bell, as thousands are poisoned in cyclosporiasis outbreak

Evan Blake
17 July 2026

Thousands of people have been poisoned in the worst outbreak of cyclosporiasis ever recorded in the United States, and federal officials announced Thursday that shredded iceberg lettuce that Taylor Farms sold to Taco Bell has infected 1,644 of them across five states. Neither corporation faces any penalty from the Trump administration, which is gutting all remaining public health programs.

Nearly 7,000 cases are confirmed or under investigation across 34 states since May 1, and states have reported at least 180 hospitalizations. Michigan has been hit hardest, with the state Department of Health and Human Services reporting 5,002 cases on Friday, up from 3,309 on Tuesday, with 102 hospitalized, in a state that ordinarily records 40 to 50 cases in a year. The year has already passed the annual record of 4,700 cases set in 2019, with six weeks of the season to run. The previous record outbreak, from raspberries originating in Guatemala in 1996, produced 978 laboratory-confirmed cases across the US and Canada.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced Thursday that 1,644 people with laboratory-confirmed infections in Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio and West Virginia had eaten at Taco Bell before falling ill between May 13 and July 13. Ninety-four have been hospitalized with no deaths reported. Michigan officials analyzed 190 of the cases and found that 90 percent had eaten iceberg lettuce.

The cases tied to Taco Bell are a subset of a far larger epidemic. Natasha Bagdasarian, Michigan's chief medical executive, said many sickened in the state did not eat there, and that a supplier selling to restaurants may also stock grocery stores. She reported two separate peaks in illness onset, around June 25 and July 7, suggesting two contaminated batches. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is investigating other clusters that may or may not be related, and one federal official said it is unknown whether the lettuce went anywhere else.

Taylor Farms issued its statement Friday in the name of its Mexican subsidiary, which it said was "voluntarily removing" all iceberg lettuce grown in central Mexico. The company said the FDA's traceback pointed to "a specific independent farm" representing "less than 1% of the U.S.'s iceberg lettuce supply." None of its branded salads or kits were involved, it claimed. Its representatives had met with the FDA and White House officials Thursday. The CDC posted its warning that night, naming Taco Bell and not Taylor Farms.

This is a voluntary withdrawal, not a mandatory recall. It was issued by a subsidiary and protects the parent brand, sold in Walmart, Kroger, Costco, Target and Trader Joe's. Neither agency has publicly named Taylor Farms or the farm it blames. The name reached the public only because federal officials leaked it to the Associated Press and the *Washington Post*. The worst cyclosporiasis outbreak in American history has thus produced no compulsory action against any corporation.

Taylor Farms was founded in 1995 by Bruce Taylor, a third-generation lettuce grower in Salinas, California. It reports $7 billion in annual revenue, more than 25,000 employees and 165 million servings of produce a week. It has repeatedly been found responsible for devastating pathogen outbreaks and received nothing but slaps on the wrist.

In August 2013, the FDA's traceback confirmed that the salad mix behind cyclosporiasis outbreaks in Iowa and Nebraska was supplied by Taylor Farms' Mexican subsidiary to Olive Garden and Red Lobster restaurants. The FDA stated then, as the company states now, that grocery store packages were not implicated. That season, 631 laboratory-confirmed cases were reported across 25 states.

In October 2024, slivered onions Taylor Farms supplied to McDonald's caused an E. coli O157:H7 outbreak that killed one person and sickened more than 100. FDA inspectors at the company's Colorado Springs plant documented dozens of violations, including inadequate handwashing and unclean equipment. The agency redacted much of the report before releasing it, and no charges were brought. The company went on with business as usual, supplying McDonald's, Taco Bell and the broader industry.

Taco Bell, owned by Yum Brands, did not arrive at this supplier by accident. The fresh-cut produce industry exists to strip the labor of washing, trimming and cutting vegetables out of the restaurant and concentrate it where it can be carried out

© World Socialist Web Site

more cheaply. A menu priced in dollars demands inputs priced in cents, and the corporation supplying them at that volume dominates the industry by reducing costs to the utmost minimum.

Cyclospora is transmitted through human waste. It contaminates produce through irrigation water fouled with sewage, or through the hands of workers denied toilets, handwashing stations and clean water. The presence of the parasite in a bag of shredded lettuce is a direct measure of the conditions imposed on those who grew and cut it.

Within hours of Thursday's announcement, television news had converted this into a story about Mexican farms. But the record does not support this simplistic narrative. The FDA has publicly named no farm and confirmed no laboratory test on any product. The only claim that a farm has been identified comes from Taylor Farms, in a statement written to blame an independent Mexican grower and portray the outbreak as contained. The lettuce was shredded, which means a processing plant stands between the field and the restaurant. When a Taylor Farms product killed a McDonald's customer in 2024, contamination was traced to Colorado.

Cyclospora is not a Mexican export. It flourishes wherever sanitation is denied to those who handle food, and it is denied to them in Guanajuato and in Salinas alike, by the same companies, for the same reason. The question is not where the lettuce was grown but under what conditions. The border screening announced by the FDA protects no one. It is a political weaponization of this public health crisis, fomenting the same nationalism the Trump administration cultivates in every sphere, directing anger at Mexican farmworkers rather than the corporation that profits from their exploitation.

The Trump administration bears direct responsibility for this outbreak, having overseen the near-total dismantling of all public health agencies over the past 18 months. This campaign is so advanced that officials nominated to run these agencies do not even know what has been done to them. On July 15, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee took testimony from Erica Schwartz, Trump's nominee to direct the CDC, a post vacant since Susan Monarez was fired in August 2025, just weeks after her confirmation. Senator Patty Murray asked whether there was any scientific justification for ending mandatory reporting of Cyclospora. "This is the first I've heard of that," Schwartz replied.

The next day, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said the administration "has a handle on the situation." She denied that vacancies or funding cuts had slowed the response and said that the CDC and FDA "have the resources they need."

The record fully contradicts Leavitt. In its April 1, 2025 purge, the Department of Health and Human Services fired 3,500 employees at the FDA and 2,400 at the CDC, part of a plan to cut the department by a quarter. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. declared that day that "the revolution begins today." The CDC's Division of Parasitic Diseases and Malaria, whose remit included Cyclospora, was dissolved. In July 2025, FoodNet surveillance was cut from eight pathogens to two, making Cyclospora tracking optional after 28 years.

These cuts did not create the parasite. Rather, they destroyed the capacity to detect it and respond—the laboratory staff, the epidemiologists and the coordination between states. Seven weeks passed between the first illness on May 13 and the CDC's admission on July 14 that cases in four states shared a common source. The traceability rule that would have shortened that search was postponed from 2026 to 2028 at the industry's request.

The thousands of illnesses the CDC has not processed are a fraction of the real toll, and the cases missing from the count are overwhelmingly those of workers. Cyclospora does not appear on the standard stool panel; a physician must order the test specifically, and it is expensive. What prompts the order is the illness's duration, so only those sick long enough to return to a doctor twice are counted. Every worker who rides out three weeks of illness rather than lose a shift or face an emergency room bill is not included in the official count.

Neither big business party will impose consequences on those responsible. The Food Safety Modernization Act was signed by Barack Obama in 2011, and its central traceability provision has still not taken effect 15 years later. The working class cannot entrust its food to the corporations that poison it or to the parties that shield them.

The agricultural and food processing monopolies must be expropriated and placed under the democratic control of the workers who grow, cut, pack and serve it. Surveillance of foodborne disease must be fully funded and internationally coordinated. This requires the political independence of the working class from both parties and the union bureaucracies who conspire with the state and corporations, through the building of rank-and-file committees in the fields, plants and restaurants, as part of the fight for socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site