US cyclosporiasis lettuce recall expands to 27 states as Taylor Farms dictates response

Evan Blake
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Over the weekend, the recall of iceberg lettuce linked to the worst cyclosporiasis outbreak in US history expanded to 27 states, reaching grocery shelves and the national foodservice chain. What Taylor Farms had described on Thursday as a limited “voluntary withdrawal” of lettuce from a single farm responsible for “less than 1%” of US iceberg lettuce supply had, by Sunday, become a formal, nationwide recall, and the corporation, not the government, was setting the terms of the response.

The outbreak has not slowed. Michigan, its epicenter, reported 6,571 cases as of Tuesday, up more than 1,500 since Friday and roughly four times the 1,645 laboratory-confirmed cases the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has processed nationally across 34 states. The federal count has barely moved in four days, even as more than 5,100 illnesses await analysis. The gap is a measure of the gutted federal surveillance that allowed the outbreak to spread undetected for seven weeks. So far, Michigan has reported 102 hospitalizations and no deaths.

On Thursday, Taylor Farms had described only a voluntary withdrawal of iceberg lettuce grown in central Mexico, a negligible share of supply by its own account. The recall it announced Friday and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) posted Saturday tells a different story. It covers lettuce distributed from June 29 to July 16 across 27 states, reaching Walmart shelves as Marketside-brand bagged and shredded lettuce, Jack in the Box restaurants, and institutions nationwide through foodservice distributors. The contaminated lettuce had not been confined to a handful of Taco Bell outlets. It had spread across the country.

Taylor Farms is one of the largest fresh-produce companies in the world. Founded in 1995 by Bruce Taylor, a third-generation grower in Salinas, California, it reports $7 billion in annual revenue and more than 25,000 employees, and by its own account makes two of every five ready-to-eat salads sold in the United States. It has been responsible for numerous prior outbreaks. In 2013, the FDA traced cyclosporiasis in Iowa and Nebraska to salad mix from its Mexican subsidiary, sickening 631 people across 25 states, and the company insisted then, as it does now, that grocery packages were not involved. In October 2024, onions it supplied to McDonald’s caused an E. coli outbreak that killed one person and sickened more than 100—no charges were brought.

The federal investigation into the outbreak, meanwhile, has produced a fiasco. On Saturday, July 18, the FDA announced that a sample of Taylor Farms de Mexico shredded iceberg lettuce, collected at the border, had tested positive for Cyclospora and that the lot had been detained. One day later the agency reversed itself, calling the result a false positive that “does not represent true amplification,” removing it from its record and, the company said, apologizing to Taylor Farms. As of July 19 there was no confirmed positive product test of any kind.

The reversal came while Taylor Farms was publicly disputing the finding, insisting the FDA had “made a mistake.” The company had direct access to the officials running the investigation. On July 16, two days before the positive result was even announced, its executives met with White House and FDA officials, by their own account to press concerns about the agencies’ handling of the outbreak.

The FDA attributed the correction to a laboratory re-review, and there is no direct evidence that the company influenced it. But a regulator that abandons its one incriminating result within a day, and then apologizes to the firm under investigation, has effectively granted that firm authority over the inquiry it should never have. Whether the reversal was sound or the product of corporate pressure, the government could not hold a single hard finding against the company for 24 hours.

At this point, the government has officially established nothing concrete in a laboratory setting. With the positive sample withdrawn, the case against the iceberg lettuce rests entirely on epidemiology and traceback: the pattern of who ate where and fell ill, and the trail from restaurant to supplier.

The agencies now acknowledge what the scale of the outbreak made obvious. The FDA’s outbreak page states that the Taco Bell illnesses “are a subset of the Cyclospora illnesses identified nationwide,” and the CDC says it is investigating other cyclosporiasis cases “unrelated to this outbreak.” The outbreak was never confined to a single restaurant chain. The same lettuce moved through supermarkets and other restaurants, and illnesses well beyond Taco Bell’s customers point to contamination far upstream, in the fields and plants that supply the whole industry.

Examining the more basic question of how human excrement reached the food of thousands in the first place leads to an indictment of the whole system of food production under capitalism. Cyclospora completes its life cycle only in the human gut; decades of research have found no other reservoir. It can only reach a bag of salad through human feces, either carried on the inadequately washed hands of the workers who pick and pack produce, or in the water used to irrigate and wash it. That so many fell ill at once means human waste entered the food supply on a "surprising scale," Matthew Moore, a food safety microbiologist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, told the *New York Times*, and points to contaminated water as the most likely route.

Keith R. Schneider, a professor of food safety at the University of Florida, noted, "You'd have to have a lot of produce being irrigated with a lot of water that was contaminated by a lot of cyclospora to see this number of cases." This was no single careless worker; it was a breakdown of sanitation and irrigation. The disinfectants used on agricultural water are designed to kill bacteria, not parasites, so water that tests clean can still carry the parasite's eggs.

The source of that contamination lies in the conditions imposed on agricultural workers in Mexico and Central America, as well as largely immigrant workers in California, Arizona and Florida alike. Farmworkers are routinely denied clean water, working toilets, handwashing and any paid leave that would let them stay home sick. Their housing is often served by failing septic systems, and irrigation water runs past latrines and sewage. Under such conditions one sick worker becomes many, and their waste reaches the produce and the water at scale. The parasite in the lettuce is a biological measure of how the workers who grow the world's food are forced to live.

None of this is new. Cyclosporiasis has returned nearly every summer for three decades, from the raspberries grown in Guatemala that caused the outbreaks of the 1990s to the bagged salads that cause them now, because the conditions that produce it have never been improved. What has changed is the pace of the decline in working conditions and the collapse of public health surveillance.

The traceability rule that could have shortened the investigation, mandated by a 2011 food safety law, was shelved until 2028—a delay the FDA announced on March 20, 2025. Days later, Taylor Farms donated $1 million to the pro-Trump super PAC MAGA Inc., according to Federal Election Commission records. It gave another $1 million to the Congressional Leadership Fund and has directed more than $3.8 million to Republican-aligned committees this decade.

The Trump administration has gutted the agencies that once tracked the parasite, dissolving the CDC division responsible for it and cutting foodborne-disease surveillance to a skeleton, while extracting not a single penalty from the corporations. This is the acceleration of a decades-long, bipartisan assault on public health, which only deepened after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the government imposing no penalty, the sickened have turned to the courts. Within days of the source being named, lawsuits were filed in Ohio and Michigan. A 27-year Army veteran hospitalized after eating at a Taco Bell in Youngstown sued the chain and its supplier Taylor Farms, and a Michigan couple sued both companies in federal court. Such lawsuits may win compensation for individual victims, but they leave the profit system that produced the outbreak untouched. Damages paid later are a cost of doing business, one these corporations will pay again so long as the fields and plants remain in private hands.

The poisoning of thousands of people is a social crime, produced by a system that subordinates public health to private profit. The means to prevent such disasters have long existed, and a society that directed the resources of the agricultural monopolies toward human need could end these outbreaks quickly by guaranteeing farmworkers clean water, sanitation and the right to stop work when ill, thereby cutting the parasite off at its source. In addition, water treatment and testing could be rapidly built to detect parasites and not only bacteria. Surveillance and rapid traceability, long blocked by the industry, could be funded and coordinated across borders. The knowledge and the resources exist; capitalism withholds them because sanitation and pathogen surveillance cut into profit.

What is required is a break by the working class with both parties of American capitalism and with the union bureaucracies that police the workplaces where food is grown, processed and served. The agribusiness and food-processing monopolies must be expropriated and placed under the democratic control of the workers who grow, cut, pack and serve the food, as part of the reorganization of economic life on socialist foundations.