



For Immediate Release  
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## **Backgrounder**

### **Expert Scientific Panel to Help Produce Industry Find Answers to Combat Seasonal *Cyclospora* Outbreaks**

#### **Seasonal *Cyclospora* Outbreaks**

Both the fresh produce industry and US public health agencies are committed to protecting the wholesomeness and safety of the nation's food supply. And although more food safety preventive controls are being implemented by the fresh produce industry than at any time in US history, unexplained *Cyclospora* outbreaks continue to occur every spring and summer.

Occurring seasonally, *Cyclospora* outbreaks have typically been associated with produce imported from Central America. Although generally not life-threatening, cyclosporiasis causes watery diarrhea, abdominal cramps, fever and fatigue and for years, an explanation for its intermittent presence in certain fruits and vegetables has been somewhat of a mystery.

Once again, this past summer, *Cyclospora* struck with multiple illness clusters. And for the first time, a possibility exists that a potential source of contamination could be fresh produce grown and harvested in the US, where strict food safety practices are required by law and demanded by the industry.

Year over year, public health officials have been stymied by the mechanism that enables the single-cell *Cyclospora* parasite to contaminate fresh berries, herbs, vegetables, leafy greens and more, causing human illness. Today a number of basic questions are still unanswered:

- What is the source of *Cyclospora* outbreaks in the US?
- Why have outbreaks occurred repeatedly in spring and summer but not other months of the year?
- How and why does the organism transfer to certain fresh produce items?

- Why have most outbreaks been linked to produce imported from Central America?
- Why have investigators been unable to pinpoint how the elusive parasite comes and goes?
- What additional mitigation steps should be taken by the fresh produce industry?

### **Fresh Express Panel of Third-party Experts to Focus on *Cyclospora***

Fresh Express, a leading supplier of value-added fresh lettuce and leafy greens in the US and Canada and the latest fresh produce company to confront an unexplained *Cyclospora* event, has announced the Fresh Express Blue-Ribbon Panel to study the *Cyclospora* problem. Comprised of independent interdisciplinary scientific experts, the Fresh Express Panel will be convened to study and report on *Cyclospora*'s mode of action and how it can be effectively combatted. Findings and recommendations will benefit the public, the global fresh produce industry and the wide-ranging public health and food safety communities.

Chaired by the internationally-recognized epidemiologist and infectious disease expert, Michael T. Osterholm, PhD, MPH, and coordinated by Fresh Express Director of Food Safety and Product Quality, John Gurrisi, the Panel will bring together scientists from critical fields including zoonotic disease, agronomy, cellular biology and food safety preventive controls.

The Fresh Express Blue-Ribbon Panel will assess contamination vectors of *Cyclospora*, potential supply chain concerns and ways for the fresh produce industry to mitigate against future outbreaks. At the same time, the Panel will provide a focused work group for collaboration and support to investigators at the US Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state public health agencies who are charged with understanding and solving the outbreaks.

### **Timeline**

1. August, 2018: Fresh Express Announces Blue-Ribbon Panel and Chair
2. Fall 2018 – January 2019: Panel Working Sessions
3. Quarter 1, 2019: Panel Findings and Recommendations Announced

### **About Michael T. Osterholm, PhD, MPH**

Dr. Osterholm is Regents Professor, McKnight Presidential Endowed Chair in Public Health, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP), Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Division of Environmental Health Sciences, School of Public Health, a

professor in the Technological Leadership Institute, College of Science and Engineering, and an adjunct professor in the Medical School, all at the University of Minnesota.

From June 2018 through May 2019 he is serving as a Science Envoy for Health Security on behalf of the US Department of State. He is the author of the 2017 book, *Deadliest Enemy: Our War Against Killer Germs*, in which he not only details the most pressing infectious disease threats of our day but lays out a nine-point strategy on how to address them, with preventing a global flu pandemic at the top of the list.

Dr Osterholm is the recipient of numerous prestigious awards and honors and has authored more than 315 professional papers and abstracts.

### **About John Gurrisi**

John Gurrisi serves as Director of Food Safety and Product Quality at Fresh Express Incorporated, the world's leading manufacturer and innovator of value-added fresh produce products. John has broad food safety responsibility for growing, manufacturing, new product assessment, customer collaboration and regulatory compliance. He leads a multi-disciplinary food safety team covering the US, Canada and Mexico and directs a multi-million-dollar implementation and investment budget. John holds multiple industry-critical food safety certifications and has contributed his technical expertise to wide-ranging industry initiatives. Prior to joining Fresh Express, John was a 20-year veteran at Darden, where he led global produce food safety initiatives.

### **About Fresh Express**

Fresh Express is a recognized leader in fresh foods and is dedicated to providing consumers with healthy, value-added salads, leafy greens, Cole slaw, juicing greens and more. Fresh Express is also a leader in food safety, recognized for its comprehensive approach throughout the supply chain. Fresh Express is a past recipient of the prestigious award for Corporate Excellence in Food Safety from the International Association for Food Protection.

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