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CALIFORNIA

Campaign Will Warn Against Illicit Cheese

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When scores of Northern Californians fell seriously ill last spring from eating bootleg Mexican-style cheese, the state dairy industry smelled trouble. Now, it wants to clear the air.

In a major public-service campaign set to be unveiled next month, cheese makers, milk producers and government health departments will begin warning Latino consumers of the dangers of eating uninspected *queso fresco* — better known to some as “bathtub cheese.”

Radio and television spots, featuring actor Edward James Olmos, are scheduled to appear on Spanish-language stations across California. The campaign, which is being put together by the Sacramento office of public-relations firm Fleishman-Hillard Inc., cost \$150,000 to develop. It will depend largely on air time being donated by local broadcasters.

“We’re trying desperately to get the word out,” says Mr. Olmos, who won an Emmy for his role as Lt. Castillo in the TV series “Miami Vice” and who has starred in such movies as “Stand and Deliver” and “Selena.”

Printouts and Posters

In addition, the campaign will distribute printouts and hang posters in Latino neighborhoods. And state and local agencies are also sponsoring training sessions for health officers and inspectors to focus on the issue.

For the California dairy industry, the media blitz is seen as a way to help make sure that its larger, \$18.5 million marketing effort — known for the slogan “It’s the Cheese” — isn’t undermined by reports of people becoming sick.

“We’re protecting our image,” says Nancy Fletcher, a spokeswoman for the California Milk Advisory Board, an industry group based in San Francisco.

Officially, *queso fresco* accounts for

about 4% of the California cheese market, with 46 million pounds produced this year, according to the state Department of Food and Agriculture. Yet experts believe that as much — or even more — of this soft, white cheese is made underground by unlicensed sites.

The bulk of these are residential kitchens or small, jerry-built facilities. But state investigators have also come across sizable commercial plants churning out the cheese.

“Many make it for their family and find out they can expand their business,” says Richard Tate, chief of the Milk and Dairy Foods Control Branch at the Food and Agriculture Department. “In some instances, they operate very large trucks and sales distribution networks.”

Experts say that the unregulated *queso fresco*, which is generally sold door to door or at flea markets and small ethnic stores, is extremely popular with immigrants because it’s similar to what they ate when they lived across the border. Immigrants have also told industry officials that they prefer to buy *queso fresco* on the street — and not prepackaged in a supermarket.

“They feel it’s fresher, and that they can trust the guy selling it because they see him every day,” Ms. Fletcher says. “It reminds them of the food they got in their homeland.”

Risks From Bacteria

But eating unregulated cheese is risky: Health officials say that it can easily become contaminated with salmonella and another type of bacterium known as listeria.

Although contaminated cheese occasionally turns up at licensed plants, state laws were instituted a decade ago tightening inspection programs and establishing a food-related disease-reporting system. And these safeguards have helped to prevent deaths and illnesses, officials say.

What makes unlicensed *queso fresco* particularly dangerous is that it’s typically

made from unpasteurized milk. Although many immigrants say they prefer the taste of cheese produced this way, experts say it allows for harmful bacteria to grow. Most of the raw milk used in uninspected *queso fresco*, according to health investigators, is probably pilfered from commercial dairies or milked from cows owned by illicit cheese makers.

Though prosecutions are rare, selling cheese from an unlicensed facility is a serious crime. Each felony conviction carries a sentence of as long as one year in jail and a fine of as much as \$10,000.

Keeping illegal and potentially dangerous cheese from going to market is the job of a task force made up of representatives from the Milk Advisory Board, the state Department of Health Services, the Department of Food and Agriculture and county safety inspectors.

But they acknowledge that, because of the high demand for *queso fresco* among Latino immigrants, their job can be overwhelming. “There’s a firmly held belief within the enforcement community that there’s a lot more illegal cheese manufacturing going on out there than we’re seeing,” says Trevor Hayes, director of the Consumer Protection Division of the Santa Clara County Department of Environmental Health.

Last April, more than 150 people in Santa Clara, San Mateo and San Benito counties became afflicted with salmonella poisoning after eating uninspected *queso fresco*. Moreover, Mr. Hayes estimates that 10 to 20 times that number of people fell ill, but didn’t report it.

Investigators traced batches of the bad cheese to unlicensed factories in Gilroy and San Jose. Felony charges were filed against one person in the San Jose case, and a warrant for his arrest is still outstanding, according to Robin Wakshull, deputy district attorney for Santa Clara County. No charges have been brought in the Gilroy case.

For licensed producers of Mexican-style cheese, the outbreak of sickness brought worries about their own financial health.

“Our business dropped,” says Gilbert de Cardenas Jr., president of Cacique USA Inc., a family-owned City of Industry company that is the nation’s leading regulated maker of *queso fresco*. “We were bombarded with calls from consumers asking



Edward James Olmos

(over please)

for information. They were scared and wanted reassurance.”

Bad Timing

Meanwhile, even cheese makers that don't specialize in queso fresco began to express concerns. Disquieting news reports about the salmonella outbreak hit just as the Milk Advisory Board was in the midst of its “It's the Cheese” campaign.

Last June, representatives from the advisory board gathered with government officials in Sacramento to come up with a strategy to get the word out about bad cheese. Out of that session came a series of focus groups with Latinas in Santa Ana and San Jose.

The women in the focus groups identified Mr. Olmos as a highly respected figure in their communities — someone whom they might listen to on a serious health matter like this.

“Not all customs are good,” a grim-faced Mr. Olmos intones in Spanish in the public-service announcements, which were produced by Los Angeles television station KVEA.

But at the same time, industry officials say they also learned another lesson from the focus groups. Even with Mr. Olmos delivering the message, persuading immigrants to stop buying uninspected cheese won't be easy.

“It takes a long time to convince them,” says the Milk Advisory Board's Ms. Fletcher. “They have a very strong feeling about this cheese.”