

## Statement from Foodborne Illness Victim Virginia Dexter

*On Nov. 6, Virginia Dexter gave a statement before the California Department of Food & Agriculture about her experience contracting hepatitis A from contaminated berry mix in 2013.*

My name is Virginia Dexter, and I am from Fields Landing, California, up along the northwest coast. Thank you so much for allowing me to share my story with you.

I have always been a very active person. I am married and raised two wonderful boys, as well as taught elementary school for 34 years. I like to work out, garden, hike, and travel. My family and I eat healthy foods, with most of the vegetables coming from our garden. On June 1, 2013, I was on vacation and started getting sick with flulike symptoms and came home. After four days of chills, fever, and vomiting that continued to worsen, my husband called the Humboldt [County] Health Department to see what flus were in our area this time of year. There were none. They asked him if I had purchased and eaten the newly recalled berry mix, which I had used in making smoothies for months. That was how we learned about my infection from the foodborne hepatitis A virus.

Upon entering the hospital, I tested positive for hepatitis A and was quarantined. My liver enzymes were so high that I was prepped for a liver transplant. Fortunately, I did not need a transplant, but I was sick from the hepatitis A infection for eight months. I had no energy, and even the simplest tasks around the house wore me out. I spent most of my days in a reclined position, feeling as though I was in a fog. At night when I tried to go to sleep, it felt like every cell in my body was shaking. Once my enzymes came within normal range, I still had to see my regular doctor monthly, as I continued to feel terrible. The virus had affected my cholesterol and thyroid. My immune system had become compromised. I caught colds and flus when I became more active and was out in the community.

My experience with foodborne illness was incredibly difficult, but I know that I am lucky because I recovered. Many do not—too many people die, and others are left with health complications for the rest of their lives. I am here today to tell you my story because it demonstrates on a very personal level how important FDA's proposed regulations are, implementing FSMA. I support FDA's supplemental proposals that apply to processed food. In particular, I am glad that FDA has proposed language in its regulations to require food processors to do product testing and environmental monitoring when appropriate. I also support measures that require companies that produce multi-ingredient products, like the frozen berry mix that made me sick, to ensure that their suppliers are providing them with safe ingredients. Testing can often be the best way of determining whether the measures put in place in a facility to ensure safe food are actually working. I also encourage FDA to provide companies with guidance that will help them understand when and where they should be doing testing, both of products and plant environment. Food processors and everyone along the food supply chain need to do everything they can to prevent contamination and the illnesses it causes. Thank you.