

Tainted berries sicken many

Mexican-grown strawberries were sold as U.S.-grown.

DETROIT (AP) — Her family thought it was just a stomach virus. Then Amanda Bischoff began vomiting constantly and the little girl's eyes turned yellow.

"She looked like a daffodil," Patty Bischoff said of her daughter.

Amanda ended up among about 150 Michigan schoolchildren and adults who authorities believe contracted hepatitis A from tainted frozen strawberries that were shipped to the government's school lunch program.

Amanda got better in time to celebrate her ninth birthday Friday, but thousands of students and educators in six states may have been exposed. That includes 9,000 people in Los Angeles, where tainted fruit cups were served last week in 18 public schools, and 2,000 students at three Georgia schools where the berries also were served.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said Wednesday it will investigate how Mexican-grown strawberries got into the USDA school lunch program, which is required to buy only U.S. products.

The berry distributor's president, Fred L. Williamson, resigned Wednesday after Andrew and Williamson Sales of San Diego was found to have

misrepresented the Mexican-grown berries as domestic.

So far, the only reported illnesses linked to the tainted berries have been in Michigan. Strawberries with the same lot numbers were also sent to Arizona, California, Georgia, Iowa and Tennessee.

It is too early to say how much danger the public is in because many of the strawberries were processed into other foods that would have been cooked and killed off the virus, Friedman said.

Hepatitis A is often spread through uncooked food and causes a mild liver infection. The elderly, people with weak immune systems and the very young risk more severe symptoms.

Clinton's school tests backed

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Clinton Wednesday won support from the nation's largest school system and 200 leaders of high-tech industries for his campaign for national testing standards for America's students.

Delaine Eastin, California's superintendent of public instruction, planned to announce her backing for the president's initiative at a White House ceremony with Clinton. White House officials consider her endorsement important because California has 5 million public school students.

Maryland, Michigan and North Carolina already have committed themselves to Clinton's program, which envisions a national set of performance standards for fourth graders in reading and eighth graders in math.

With California's participation, 20

percent of the nation's school children "will be enrolled in the type of testing regime the president has recommended that would bring high quality standards to our schools," presidential spokesman Mike McCurry said.

It was unclear whether Clinton's plan had bipartisan support from California's political establishment. McCurry said he did not know if Gov. Pete Wilson, a Republican, had expressed a view. Eastin, a Democrat, is elected statewide rather than appointed by the governor.

McCurry also said that leaders of high-tech industries based in California's Silicon Valley "are going to say that they, as an industry, are pledging their support for the president's initiative."

Russia, Belarus agree to union

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia and Belarus signed a treaty Wednesday meant to bring their people, economies and armies closer together, in a first step toward reintegration by two former Soviet republics.

President Boris Yeltsin, who signed the accord with his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko, stressed the two Slavic nations will remain sovereign and separate.

"We'll not transform our community into a unified state for now, but a union of two states," Yeltsin said at the signing ceremony in a gilded Kremlin hall.

No other ex-Soviet republics have shown a real desire for reunification since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, creating 15 separate states.

Although Russian hard-liners hailed the treaty as a step toward the revival of a mighty state, Belarusian

opponents expressed fear their country of 10 million people would lose its independence to much larger Russia.

Critics also argued that integrating the two struggling countries will only create more problems for both.

About 5,000 opponents of the accord tried to march to the Russian Embassy in the Belarusian capital, Minsk. Riot police confronted them, clubbing and hitting the marchers when the protesters threw stones at them.

The clash was the worst violence in Belarus in months. Russian news broadcasts showed policemen beating women with truncheons and an officer swinging his boot to hit an injured protester who was lying on the pavement.

Opposition and human rights activists said about 200 people were beaten and detained. The government

confirmed 70 people were detained and three policemen were injured, but declined to provide more information.

In Moscow, small groups of opponents staged protests, warning against any alliance with Lukashenko, an authoritarian leader nostalgic for the old Soviet Union. He has proposed — and Moscow has rejected — a full merger.

Under Wednesday's treaty, the two countries plan to coordinate economic reforms and military activities, create joint energy and transportation systems and possibly introduce a common currency. A Supreme Council, including top leaders from both countries, is to outline joint policies.

Although the treaty calls for consultations on a wide variety of policies, it proposes little concrete action. Russia and Belarus have removed customs barriers but otherwise have done little toward real integration.

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