

PHOENIX

Genetic tests prove state fair was source of Arizona E. coli outbreak

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Health officials knew the Arizona State Fair was the source of an E. coli outbreak weeks before publicly confirming it.

A lack of hand-washing stations at the petting zoo exhibit has prompted calls for change.

The incident motivated an Arizona state senator to propose a new law mandating stricter safety measures for petting zoos.

E. coli tests results show state and county health officials were aware the Arizona State Fair was the source of an outbreak even as they withheld details from the public.

At least 11 cases tied to the outbreak shared the same genetic makeup, meaning victims were sickened by the same strain and source, county health inspection reports show.

The records remove any doubt about the fair's connection to the November outbreak, which sickened multiple children and left some hospitalized with life threatening conditions.

The test results, obtained by Seattle food safety lawyer **Bill Marler** and shared with The Arizona Republic, were primarily dated Nov. 13 — weeks before officials publicly confirmed the connection and closed the investigation.

Marler, who represents two families whose kids were hospitalized in the outbreak, said genome sequencing is so advanced and accurate that health officials were almost certainly aware that the fair's petting zoo was the source of the infection,

"With the results ... you know you've got a petting zoo outbreak," he said.

The Maricopa County Department of Public Health on Jan. 6 officially confirmed the fair's petting zoo as the source. Agency spokesperson Courtney Kreuzwiesner said the investigation "is now closed" and 18 cases were identified "as confirmed or probable outbreak cases, including 16 children."

Patients in most of the cases reported exposure to petting zoos or other animal exposures. "Of the 18 cases, 13 reported attending the Arizona State Fair," she said.

[The Republic first reported on the outbreak](#) based on interviews with parents whose children got sick after visiting the fair in the final week of October. Parents and health advocates pointed to a pig that children came into contact with at the petting zoo.

[The Republic found there were no hand-washing stations](#) with soap and running water attached to the petting exhibit; only hand sanitizer, which does not kill all strains of E. Coli.

As the number of cases climbed in October and November, [health officials did not disclose potential sources](#), the number of cases, the geographic spread or any potential connections.

The Arizona Department of Health Services reported a "twofold increase" of E. coli cases statewide in October and also acknowledged an increase in hospitalizations for hemolytic uremic syndrome — a sometimes fatal complication brought on by E. coli infections that can cause kidney failure.

State officials have yet to acknowledge the fair's connection to the outbreak. They justified withholding information about what happened and how the infection was

spread based on a lack of "ongoing risk."

Health Department spokesperson JP Martin said in December the department "categorically disagrees" with any suggestion officials "withheld critical information from the public." He deferred questions on the outbreak to the county, saying it was the lead agency.

There is little distinction between the county's "confirmed and probable cases," said Marler, who [has tracked E. coli cases for years](#). He maintained all 18 cases are likely tied to the state fair outbreak, saying an issue in many public health investigations is the ability to interview every patient to determine where and when they got sick.

"What's deadly for the state is that they apparently used to have hand-washing stations at the exhibit and they just decided to stop doing that," Marler said, adding officials, "shouldn't be surprised if there was an outbreak."

E. coli outbreak prompts call for new petting zoo law

Arizona state Sen. John Kavanaugh responded to the outbreak by calling for new petting zoo safety laws.

Kavanaugh, R-Fountain Hills, wants handwashing or hand sanitizing stations at any place where the public is allowed to pet or feed animals. He also wants warning signs and constant adult supervision at petting zoos.

[Senate Bill 1082](#) would require petting zoos, animal encounter exhibits and similar operations to "maintain the animals in an enclosed or otherwise restricted area so that persons who have not entered through a designated entrance cannot pet, feed or otherwise physically contact the animals."

Kavanaugh's proposed bill would give the Department of Health Services inspection and enforcement authority over petting zoos and animal exhibits and the ability to fine them no more than \$100 per violation.

The call for legislation came after a blistering critique by former state health department director Will Humble, who said the state appears to have abandoned past practices to ensure public safety at the state fair petting zoo.

Humble is the executive director of the nonprofit Arizona Public Health Association and [in a December blog post](#) he said it was standard practice for years to send staff to the fair before opening day.

"Our goal was simple: make sure the petting zoo area had the basic protections needed to keep kids safe," Humble wrote. "We didn't license petting zoos, and we didn't have enforcement power. But the State Fair always welcomed our help, and they followed our recommendations."

Humble cited four key "uncomplicated" steps:

- Barriers to guide visitors in and out safely.

- Limits on how many kids could be inside the animal area at one time.

- Hand-washing sinks with running water, soap and paper towels at both the entrance and exit.

- A staff monitor on-site to watch behavior and make sure kids wash their hands on the way out.

The state Health Department declined to comment on the blog post. Humble called the E. coli outbreak "preventable."

Petting zoos are notorious for outbreaks of an E. coli strain known as STEC, or Shiga toxin-producing E. coli bacteria, which causes vomiting, bloody diarrhea, cramps and dehydration that can lead to kidney failure.

Outbreaks have been repeatedly traced to fairs, farms and zoos, including one at the San Diego County Fair in 2019 responsible for the death of a 2-year-old.

"Petting zoos need basic controls in place to reduce risk — especially when little kids (and pigs) are involved," Humble wrote in the blog post. "The 2025 outbreak

demonstrates that Arizona can't rely on safety practices that disappear when health department leadership changes."

Fair didn't work with state health department, followed normal protocol

State Fair officials said they don't typically work with with the ADHS unless there is a specific need.

"Protocols for interacting with animals remained unchanged from previous years, so we continued with our normal procedures as we have in the past," spokesperson Brianda Martinez said in December.

The petting zoo was located in the fair's agriculture building. Martinez said there were hand-washing stations and full restrooms inside the building and close to the petting zoo, but she acknowledged they weren't part of the exhibit.

The Arizona State Fair in Phoenix ran from Sept. 19 to Oct. 26. More than 1 million people attended.

The petting zoo is [run by a company called Great American Entertainment](#) in Stephenville, Texas. A representative on Nov. 21 declined to answer questions about the E. coli outbreak and hung up. Owners and managers have not responded to subsequent calls and messages.

Great American has operated the fair's petting zoo for at least 15 years. The company was founded in 1983 and bills itself online as "the number one educational and entertainment attraction company in the country." It provides "hands-on" shows for the event, fair and rodeo industry, according to its website.

Great American was [involved in a 2005 E. coli outbreak](#) at a fair in Fresno, California, that left six children hospitalized, including a 2-year-old who developed hemolytic uremic syndrome, records show. Her kidneys failed and she had a series of strokes which left her with damaged kidneys, blindness in one eye, and difficulty walking.

Martinez acknowledged in November fair officials were "made aware of several E. coli cases" and were working with county and state health investigators. She later said the E. coli outbreak will affect what happens at the fair in 2026.

"The current situation will definitely factor into our discussions regarding all programming for 2026," she said.

Parents, not public health officials, sounded E. coli alarm

The public's first inkling the state fair was the possible source of the E. coli outbreak came from a nonprofit group that supports children afflicted with hemolytic uremic syndrome.

Directors of the Tennessee-based group, [Parker's Promise](#), said two parents contacted them from Phoenix Children's Hospital in early November and reported their children got sick after visiting the fair's petting zoo. They soon heard from others.

Mary McGonigle-Martin, the organization's vice president, said public health officials put lives at risk by holding back information about the source of outbreaks.

The group focused on the pig after hearing from Sommer Lee of Gilbert, whose daughter was hospitalized for four days with STEC.

Lee told The Republic her 16-year-old daughter stopped to pet a pig inside the zoo enclosure while at the fair Oct. 26 with her boyfriend. It was the only animal she touched. Her boyfriend, who did not touch the animal, did not get sick.

Jenna Trybus of Phoenix shared a similar account. Her 12-year-old daughter spent nearly three weeks at Phoenix Children's undergoing two blood transfusions and dialysis after her kidneys shut down.

Trybus, who hired Marler's firm to investigate the outbreak, said her daughter attended the fair Oct. 26 with her father. She started getting sick three days later and was hospitalized Nov. 1 after blood in her stool tested positive for STEC.

Her daughter was unable to keep anything down. Her condition worsened. Bloodwork showed toxins from the E. coli were destroying her red blood cells. She ended up on a feeding tube.

Trybus said doctors at Phoenix Children's told her the hospital treated dozens of children with STEC. At least eight children suffered kidney failure, she said.

"Doctors and nurses were asking everybody if they had gone to the fair," Trybus told The Republic. "It seemed like the petting zoo and the fair was a common denominator."

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