

## Salmonella outbreak prompts demands for more scrutiny of food processing plants

By the time Cheri Markos received a letter from Kellogg's warning her not to eat the peanut butter sandwich crackers she'd purchased at Costco, the snacks were long gone. She'd already eaten them or given them away to friends.

"I assumed they were safe because they hadn't been on the list of recalled products," says Marcos, a doctor of chiropractic in Shoreline, Washington. "You'd think they could get these letters out earlier."

While neither Markos nor her friends came down with symptoms of salmonella poisoning, her critique of the largest food recall in United States history echoed those of many outraged consumers and food safety experts. In the months following the first recalls of contaminated peanut paste linked to Peanut Corp. of America, internal documents, federal and state investigations, interviews with former plant employees and media reports have exposed many faults in the nation's food chain.

It's something that critics have long known, but their calls for reform have never moved Congress to act — until 9 people died, 150 were hospitalized and the list of recalled products surpassed 3000 separate items, from candy to dog food. Of the 691 confirmed cases linked to the outbreak, one is from Canada. The rest are spread across 46 states, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention final Mar. 17 update.

President Barack Obama laid blame squarely on the US Food and Drug Administration. "The FDA has not been able to catch some of these things as quickly as I expect them to catch them, so we're going to be doing a complete review of FDA operations," he told the television network NBC. "At a bare minimum, we should be able to count on our government keeping our kids safe when they eat peanut butter."

Overhauling the organization



The now-closed Peanut Corporation of America plant in Blakely, Georgia.

charged with ensuring drug and food safety has been a cry for years from consumer groups, congressional critics and the Government Accountability Office. Currently, at least a dozen federal departments and agencies, operating under myriad statutes and inter-agency agreements, oversee the nation's food safety regulations.

The Institute of Medicine called for taking food away from the FDA to create a single food safety entity within the US Department of Health and Human Services.

A look at annual foodborne statistics shows that the current US system is failing miserably, says Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a health and nutrition consumer advocacy group. It estimates that 5000 Americans die annually from foodborne illnesses and that for every reported case of illness due to exposure to salmonella, e.coli, listeria or other foodborne contaminants, 38.5 others go

unreported, adding up to 76 million — one-quarter of the US population. "Comprehensive food safety reform is the kind of change we need," he says. "The status quo, after all, is killing about 5000 and sickening tens of million Americans a year."

After a lull in outbreaks from 2003 to the spring of 2007, there have been a rash of food recalls over the past 2 years, including tomatoes, hot dogs, peppers, lettuce and meat. Recalls for the latter alone jumped to 30 million pounds in 2008 from a total of 156 235 pounds in 2007.

But there are smaller steps that can be taken while the FDA is being overhauled, suggest food and health safety advocates:

- Better and more timely reporting of food poisoning cases among local, state and federal public health agencies. Following the thread of people sickened across the nation by a common food now takes too long because states aren't required to report suspected food poisoning cases to the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As well, doctors often fail to think of food poisoning as a culprit.

- Tougher and more accountable scrutiny of food processing and distribution plants directly by government employees or third-party contractors, not people connected to the food industry. Improved coordination between federal and state government departments and agencies.
- Better training for restaurant food handlers and inspectors of food processing plants.

Attorney Bill Marler, an advocate for improved food safety oversight, says economic factors also played into the latest outbreak. Big-box retailers, such as Costco and Wal-Mart, are forcing distributors to cut corners in order to keep prices low, he says. "These retailers need to understand what their price pressures are doing."

Also, a dearth of government inspectors has led large food industry companies, such as Kellogg's, to hire private inspectors to check out plants. These private audits have become somewhat of a "bad joke," says Mansour Samadpour, a microbiologist who runs a laboratory in Seattle, Washington.

The scores on such audits are always unreasonably high, such as 96, 97 or 98 out of a perfect 100, Samadpour explains. "Any inspector who goes into a restaurant or food plant can tell you there's always a list of at least 20 deficiencies produced, things that should be fixed. Not so in these private audits. If I see one more score of 96, I'm going to puke."

As the death toll rose, a Blakely, Georgia plant operated by the Peanut Corp. of America closed and filed for bankruptcy. The firm also operated a plant in Texas that was closed by the state in February upon finding a faulty air-handling system and dead rodents, rodent excrement and bird feathers in a crawl space above the plant's produc-

tion area. Texas administrators also ordered a recall of every product ever shipped from the plant.

Company officials called before Congress to testify pleaded the Fifth Amendment — the right to remain silent and not present self-incriminating evidence. But documents released by the House Sub-

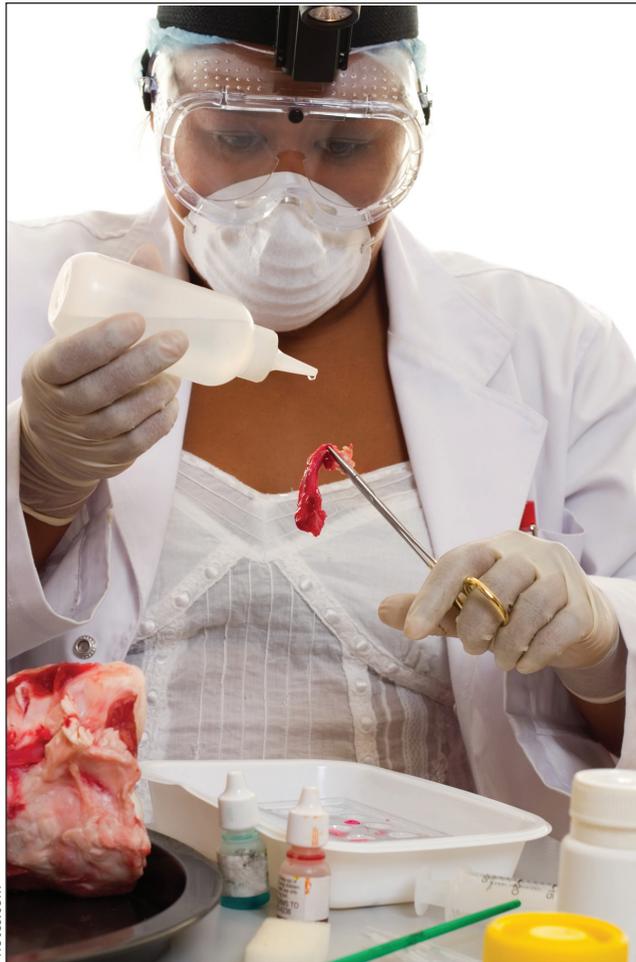
committee concluded in March 2008 that the Peanut Corp. plant in Georgia was "SUPERIOR." Federal investigators later found that the plant dripped rainwater and had been storing peanuts in unsanitary conditions. And for at least 9 months before health officials linked the growing salmonella cases to the plant, it was shipping tainted peanuts into the long and complicated food chain.

Such as the "Austin toasty crackers with peanut butter" that ultimately ended up in Markos' hands. They were distributed by Kellogg Sales Co. of Michigan, which also had to recall its other brand of crackers — Keebler — and reimburse customers. Kellogg's letter to Costco shoppers reads in part: "We sincerely apologize to our consumers, and cannot express enough our disappointment and deep regret about this situation. The food industry upholds certain operating standards, and we are proud that we exceed these standards in our facilities."

Efforts to obtain FDA comment on Obama's criticism of their operations were unsuccessful. But Stephen F. Sundlof, director of the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, recently told Congress that mandatory recall authority would strengthen the agency's ability to protect Americans from foodborne illnesses. Currently, the government can only recommend a company voluntarily recall its products.

"Food safety is a priority for the new administration," Sundlof assured members of Congress. "We can, and will, learn from the outbreak what we can do to better ensure the safety of our food supply moving forward."

Other areas being considered include the FDA having more access to food records during routine inspections and requiring more preventive controls to help thwart food poisoning. — Patricia S. Guthrie, Seattle, Washington



Food safety advocates say that the United States government must move towards more third-party scrutiny of food processing plants instead of relying on industry.

committee on Oversight and Investigations revealed that company president Stewart Parnell ordered products that had tested positive for salmonella be shipped out after obtaining negative test results from another testing firm. Media outlets reported that Georgia state health inspectors repeatedly cited the plant for violations in 2006 and 2007 after finding dirty surfaces and walls, and grease residue throughout the facility.

Several attempts to reach Kellogg's representatives for comment were unsuccessful. But the firm's private audi-

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