

**FLEXNEWS****∴ Food Industry News****Categories: Food Safety****FDA Tries to Get Ahead of Food Recalls**

Source: Reuters

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Washington, Apr. 9 - Not a single person was diagnosed with food poisoning, but the U.S. Food and Drug Administration made the move anyway -- on March 31 it announced a nationwide recall of pistachios after Salmonella was found in one producer's 2008 crop.

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Since then, recall announcements have come daily, for a total of 290 so far. And in another new tack, the FDA is not telling people to throw out the products, merely to leave them unopened until it is clear what the risk is.

"If you don't know what to do, leave them on the shelf and don't eat them," said Dr. David Acheson, associate commissioner for foods at the FDA.

Acheson admits he may never learn if the recall prevented any illnesses. "You never know in retrospect if you made a difference," he told Reuters in an interview.

But food poisoning is very common in the United States. On Thursday the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report showing that efforts to improve food safety had stagnated since 2004, with virtually no decline in the numbers of salmonella cases last year compared with 2005 to 2007.

Acheson said the FDA is taking a new approach cautioning the public in part because of lessons learned in a series of high-profile outbreaks, and in part because of a push from acting FDA commissioner Dr. Josh Sharfstein, President Barack Obama's choice to be deputy commissioner.

Acheson has been a regular speaker on media briefings and before Congress since an outbreak of salmonella in 2006 that killed three people and was traced to spinach. "We have been learning since then," Acheson said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is responsible for meat and products but the FDA watches out for just about all other foods. It has been under heavy fire for the recent outbreaks traced to spinach, peppers and most lately, peanut products.

But when he announced he was nominating former New York health commissioner Dr. Margaret Hamburg to head FDA, Obama said the FDA has been underfunded and understaffed, with the ability to inspect barely 7,000 out of 150,000 food processing plants and warehouses every year.

**PEANUT RECALL**

So the FDA has relied heavily on state inspectors and on the companies themselves. The weakness of this approach

became clear when Peanut Corporation of America shipped peanut products from two plants despite having found salmonella.

These contaminated products have sickened more than 600 people, may have helped kill nine and forced the recall of 3,200 products from snacks to ice cream.

It was the biggest food recall ever seen, but Acheson said it paid off when salmonella was found in a packet of recalled Kellogg Co. Austin snack crackers.

With the pistachios, FDA did not wait. When company testing showed salmonella in nuts packed by California-based Setton Pistachio, the recall was immediate.

"It was done out of context of sickness, which is better than reacting to 600 people being sick," Acheson told Reuters.

"I'm in no doubt it's the right thing to do."

Acheson is also hoping to get new resources from Congress. "We have been talking to Congress for some time about new powers, new authority," he said.

While nothing happened in the last session, Acheson said it appeared the current Congress appears ready to make some changes. "I am hopeful," he said.

Lawmakers including Representative Rosa DeLauro, who heads a house subcommittee overseeing food safety, have introduced legislation this year to improve food safety oversight. The bills focus largely on giving the FDA more funding and power, such as the ability to conduct a mandatory recall.

There have also been calls to set up a new food safety agency separate from FDA and USDA.

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