Celery Contamination From Texas Processor Kills Four

Betsy Blaney, Associated Press Writer

The Food and Drug Administration is looking into a produce contamination case linked to a shuttered Texas processing plant and may decide to expand a recall, an agency official told The Associated Press.

Texas health officials shut down the SanGar Produce & Processing Co. plant in San Antonio and ordered a recall of all of the produce that had passed through the plant since January. The plant is linked to contaminated celery that sickened at least six people this year, four of whom died.

SanGar issued the recall Wednesday. A decision on whether to expand the recall would be made once the FDA learns more, the FDA's Office of Food Safety deputy director, Don Kraemer, said Thursday.

The Texas Department of State Health Services traced six of 10 known cases of listeriosis in the state during an eight month period to celery processed at the plant. The agency is investigating the origins of the other four cases, which include one death.

Health inspectors found problems with sanitation at the plant, including a condensation leak over a food production area. The health department is trying to determine who the now-recalled produce was sold to and whether it was used in other products. The agency recommends that customers throw out or return all SanGar products.

Texas health department spokeswoman Carrie Williams said that the state asked the company to close voluntarily.

"They refused, so we shut them down and ordered a recall," she said.

Kenneth Sanquist Jr., the company's president, said in a statement Thursday that it questions the validity of the state's lab results because flawed methods were used to collect its samples. The sample at the plant "appears" to have been taken by someone not wearing proper lab attire and proper gloves, and was transported in a nonrefrigerated container, he said.

Williams said the agency stands by its analysis and lab results.

Health officials are trying to determine how much potentially tainted produce passed through the plant since January and whether it could have ended up in other products. Some of the celery was grown in California, but there appeared to be no problem with it until it reached the SanGar plant, Williams said.

Health officials said the produce was sold to restaurants, schools and hospitals, but that they don't believe it was sold in grocery stores.

The 10 people who contracted listeriosis were in Bexar, Travis and Hidalgo counties, in central and southern parts of the state. Williams said the agency has no information so far that the recalled produce — which also includes lettuce, pineapple and honeydew — were distributed outside of Texas.

On its website, SanGar says that "indirectly through several of our customers, our products are distributed in the Rio Grande Valley, Houston, Dallas and Oklahoma."

There have been three reported cases of listeriosis in Oklahoma this year, but the state is not aware of any cases connected to the recall, Oklahoma State Department of Health spokesman Larry Weatherford said.

In an earlier statement, Sanquist Jr. defended the company's safety record, saying independent testing contradicts the state's claim.

"This independent testing shows our produce to be absolutely safe, and we are aggressively fighting the state's erroneous findings," Sanquist said in a statement.

Sanquist declined to comment to the AP on Thursday and referred all questions to attorney Jason Galvan, who did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

All 10 people who contracted the disease in Texas already had serious underlying health problems, the health department said.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 500 people die of listeriosis each year in the U.S., and about 2,500 people become seriously ill.

Those with weaker immune systems — including pregnant women, young children, the elderly and those battling serious illness — are most at risk of becoming seriously ill or dying because of listeriosis, the CDC says. Healthy adults and children occasionally are infected with the disease but rarely become seriously ill.

The health department prohibited SanGar from reopening the plant without agency approval.

Williams said the agency found "relatively minor sanitation" issues during a routine inspection last year but took no action. She said the company assured the agency it would correct the issues.

SanGar has been licensed by the state since May 2008, Williams said.

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