FDA: Company Shipped Tainted Peanut Butter

Mary Clare Jalonick, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) -- A New Mexico peanut company linked to a recent salmonella outbreak distributed peanut and almond butters after its own internal testing showed the products were contaminated, the Food and Drug Administration says.

Sunland Inc. is the nation's largest organic peanut butter processor, though it also produces many non-organic products. The company recalled hundreds of nuts and nut butters manufactured since 2010 after one of its products, Trader Joe's Valencia Creamy Peanut Butter, was linked to 41 salmonella illnesses around the country in September.

FDA reports released this week show that repeated agency inspections found problems at the plant since 2007, though government officials didn't take any action or release the results of those inspections until after the illnesses were discovered this year. Sunland sold hundreds of different peanut products to many of the nation's largest grocery chains, including Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, Safeway, Target and other large national retailers.

In a monthlong investigation in September and October, FDA inspectors found 28 different samples of salmonella in Sunland's plant. The agency also found improper handling of the products, unclean equipment and uncovered trailers of peanuts outside the facility that were exposed to rain and birds.

"Investigators found that employees improperly handled equipment, containers, and utensils used to hold and store food," the agency report reads. "Employees handling peanut products wiped gloved hands on street clothes and other times failed to wash their hands or change gloves. There were no hand washing sinks in the peanut processing building production or packaging areas and employees had bare-handed contact with ready-to-package peanuts."

The FDA said that over the past three years, company's tests showed products were shipped even though portions of their lots, or daily production runs, tested positive for salmonella. The agency also found that the internal tests failed to find salmonella when it was present.

Company officials deny that they knowingly shipped tainted products.

"At no time in its twenty-four year history has Sunland, Inc. released for distribution any products that it knew to be potentially contaminated with harmful microorganisms," Sunland president and CEO Jimmie Shearer said in a statement on the company's website. "In every instance where test results indicated the presence of a contaminant, the implicated product was destroyed and not released for distribution."

The FDA records show these problems go back a number of years. FDA inspectors found many of the same problems — including employees putting their bare fingers in to empty jars before they were filled, open bags of ingredients, unclean equipment, and many other violations — in a 2007 inspection. Similar problems were recorded by inspectors in 2009, 2010 and 2011.

Sunland's New Mexico plants are currently shut down. Spokeswoman Katalin Coburn said the company is continuing to receive shipments of peanuts and is hoping to reopen when the FDA gives them approval.

A separate peanut butter outbreak in 2009 was linked to hundreds of illnesses and nine deaths.

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