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Senate peanut hearing spotlights serious food-safety problems

By Jon H. Harsch

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In an explosive Senate hearing Thursday, Senators and witnesses joined in expressing outrage over a five-month lag between last September's outbreak of peanut-paste-related illnesses last September and identifying the Peanut Corp. of America as the source in January. Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Tom Harkin (D-IA) said the answer could be a single federal agency, rather than dividing responsibility among the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Harkin said that with "so many pieces out there," perhaps USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service should be put in overall charge of all food safety because of its preventive approach to the meat and poultry inspections it is responsible for – and because of increased food-safety problems with other food products which come under FDA jurisdiction. He pointed out that "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tells us that there are 76 million cases of food-borne illness annually in the U.S., resulting in 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths. Those statistics would be disturbing anywhere in the world. They are totally intolerable in the United States of America. . . Our systems for tracing tainted products and removing them from commerce must be stronger, better coordinated, faster, and more efficient."

In the current peanut case which has resulted in a massive recall of peanut products coast to coast, Rear Admiral Ali S. Khan, Assistant Surgeon General and Deputy Director of the National Center for Zoonotic, Vector-borne, and Enteric Diseases at the Center for Disease Control, testified that peanut-related illnesses appear to have affected 575 people in 43 states and Canada, resulting in 127 people hospitalized and eight deaths.

Ranking Member Saxby Chambliss (D-GA) agreed on the seriousness of the challenge, saying that "We have a system that is flawed." Calling for major reform of the food safety system, he said "There is a total lack of information sharing between all of our food safety organizations that we simply have got to fix. . . It is pretty obvious that we have got to make some major changes and we can't do it without significant input. . . to talk about how we develop this legislatively."

Chambliss and other senators were particularly shocked when Stephen Sundlof, Director of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, explained that in 12 separate instances, private labs found salmonella in peanut products sent for testing by Peanut Corp. of America's now-closed Blakely, Georgia plant. In response to senators' questions, Sundlof said that the private labs were under no obligation to report these positive tests to the FDA or to the Georgia Department of Agriculture that FDA had contracted to carry out inspections of the Peanut Corp. plant.

Gabrielle Meunier, the mother of seven-year-old Christopher who was hospitalized in Vermont for six days after eating a peanut butter cracker, warned that her son and other victims may suffer long-term complications from salmonella poisoning. She also explained that she and Christopher's doctors ran into stone walls when they sought information about her son's illness. She called for "a national food-borne-illness database registry" and said that "I was kept in the dark. . . Had I had the opportunity to talk to other mothers whose children were sick and compare what they had eaten, I have no doubt: we would have solved this cracker case back in early December."

With a House hearing set for Feb. 11th and the Obama administration committed to action on food-safety issues, it is considered a given that legislation affecting the food industry will be passed and signed into law soon. More immediately, Sundlof told the Senate committee that FDA has launched "both criminal and regulatory investigations." Based on indications that Peanut Corp.'s Blakeley plant knowingly shipped products that had tested positive for salmonella, Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) said in the hearing Thursday that "I would like to see people go to jail."