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## **Food safety reforms likely in wake of Peanut Corp. abuses**

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Faced with mounting evidence of repeated criminal actions in his Georgia and Texas plants, Peanut Corporation of America (PCA) President and Owner Stewart Parnell pleaded the 5<sup>th</sup> amendment Wednesday to avoid testifying in a congressional hearing. One after, Republicans along with Democrats on the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations expressed outrage over repeated cases of PCA knowingly shipping peanut products contaminated with deadly salmonella – and outrage over grossly inadequate federal and state food safety inspection systems.

Lawmakers invited Parnell to eat something from a canister of peanut-containing snacks involved in the massive nation-wide recall of some 1,800 products containing ingredients which PCA supplied to some 50 other companies including major national brands. Parnell's only response to the lawmakers was to state that "on advice of my counsel, I respectfully decline to answer your questions based on the protections afforded me under the U.S. Constitution." PCA plant manager Sammy Lightsey invoked the same 5<sup>th</sup> amendment protection.

But although Parnell and Lightsey refused to testify, their own e-mails spoke volumes. Drawing on fresh evidence uncovered in an active federal criminal investigation, committee members read from e-mails between the two men. In one e-mail from last October, a month after the first cases of salmonella poisoning which in January would be linked to PCA products, Parnell wrote to Lightsey to complain about the problem of lab tests showing salmonella in PCA products: "We need to discuss this. The time lapse, beside the cost is costing us huge \$\$\$\$\$\$ and causing obviously a huge lapse in time from the time we pick up peanuts until the time we can invoice." This e-mail and other documents indicate that instead of destroying contaminated product as required by law, PCA knowingly shipped out potentially lethal peanut products.

Wednesday's hearing opened with emotional testimony from family members of two of the eight people known to have died as a result of eating salmonella-contaminated peanut products traced back to PCA's plant in Blakely, Georgia. Peter Hurley, an Oregon police officer whose three-year-old son was sickened by Austin peanut butter crackers which contained peanut-paste salmonella from the Blakely plant, said flatly that this latest salmonella outbreak shows the need for faster food safety response, giving the federal

Food and Drug Administration authority to stop production and recall tainted products, and “the ability to quickly prosecute.” Reacting to PCA’s action in knowingly shipping contaminated products, Hurley said “As a police officer, I can unequivocally say that it is criminal.”

Lawmakers responded to the testimony of family members and testimony from the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and from private testing labs by promising that there will be legislation to deal with serious food safety problems. There was general agreement that the FDA should be given authority to mandate product recalls and that there should be a requirement, for the first time, that lab tests showing contamination should be reported to state and federal authorities. There was also agreement that food safety has suffered at both the state and federal levels due to many years of cutbacks in funding and manpower.

Jeffrey Almer, whose 72-year-old mother died in Minnesota from salmonella-contaminated peanut butter, said “Her death and the deaths of seven others could have been so easily prevented if it were not for the greed and avarice of the Peanut Corporation of America. PCA appears to be more concerned with squeezing every dollar possible at the expense of sanitary conditions and sound food manufacturing processes. . . We cannot continue to ignore the public health threat caused by poorly regulated and contaminated food. We cannot allow food safety to be continually underfunded and expose unsuspecting Americans to deadly pathogens. . . It is imperative that Americans trust that their health is not compromised by the food on their plate.”

#30