Update on the Salmonella Typhimurium
FDA/CDC Joint Media Teleconference
January 17, 2009

Coordinator: Good afternoon and thank you all for standing by. At this time all participants are in a listen-only mode. After the presentation we will conduct a question and answer session.

To ask a question you'll be asked to press star 1 and record your name. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time.

I'll now turn the meeting over to Ms. Stephanie Kwisnek, you may begin.

Stephanie Kwisnek: Thank you operator. And thank you ladies and gentlemen for joining us on a Saturday afternoon. I am Stephanie Kwisnek from FDA's Office of Public Affairs.

This is an FDA CDC teleconference for conventional media to ask questions about the ongoing investigation of the recent salmonella outbreak linked to peanut butter.

We have speakers today from the Food and Drug Administration and from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Our two speakers this afternoon are Dr. Stephen Sundlof, Director, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, FDA.

And Dr. Robert Tauxe, Deputy Director, Division of Foodborne Bacterial Mycotic Diseases at CDC. We also have officials on hand to answer any questions that may fall under their areas.

Our subject matter experts are Michael Rogers, Director, Division of Field op - Field Investigations, Office of Regional Operations with the FDA.

After our speakers make a brief remark, we will move to the question and answer segment. Reports will be in a listen only mode until we open the call up for questions.

When asking a question please state your name and affiliation, also please limit yourself to one question and one follow up so we can get in as many questions as possible.

At this time I would like to turn it over to Dr. Sundlof.

Stephen Sundlof: Thank you Stephanie and good afternoon everybody. As we stated in our call yesterday, FDA is conducting a very active and dynamic investigation into the source of the salmonella typhimurium outbreak.

At this time we have traced only one likely source of salmonella typhimurium contamination to a plant owned by the Peanut Corporation of America or PCA in Georgia which makes both a brand of peanut butter distributed in bulk to large institutions like nursing homes and a peanut paste, a concentrated product consisting of ground roasted peanuts that is distributed to food manufacturers to be used as an ingredient in many products including cookies, crackers, cereal and ice cream.

FDA has notified the Peanut Corporation of America that product samples originating from their Blakely Georgia processing plant have been tested and found positive for salmonella by laboratories in the states of Minnesota and Connecticut.

The state of Minnesota reported to FDA that its samples of King Nut peanut butter are a genetic match to the salmonella that caused illnesses in those states and around the country.

These laboratories are reporting to FDA that the samples manufactured by PCA and distributed to institutions such as long term care facilities and cafeterias, that's where they are shipping.

As a result of these updated test results, PCA today expanded its voluntary recall to include all peanut butter produced on or after August 8th 2008 and all peanut paste produced on or after September 26th 2008 in its Blakely, Georgia plant because of potential salmonella contamination.

The product being recalled is sold by PCA in bulk packaging in containers ranging in size from 5 pounds to 1700 pounds. The peanut paste is sold in sizes ranging from 35 pound containers to products sold by the tanker.

These products are not sold directly to consumers and PCA has stopped all production at its Blakely Georgia processing plant as the FDA continues its investigation into the source of the salmonella contamination.

Also as a result of PCA's expanded recall, the Kellogg's company has instituted a voluntary nation wide recall of Austin Brand, Keebler Brand Peanut Butter Sandwich Crackers and selected snack packs of Famous Amos Peanut Butter Cookies and Keebler Soft Batch Home Style Peanut Butter Cookies, which may have been manufactured with products supplied by PCA.

The peanut butter and peanut butter paste recalled by PCA last night is used by many other manufacturers to make a variety of other peanut-containing products such as cakes, crackers, candies, cookies and ice cream.

Based on this information and on the current state of the investigation, FDA believes that as a precaution consumers should avoid eating products that have been recalled and latest information on those products that are the subject of the recall can be found on the FDA website. And those products should be discarded.

In terms of food products which contain peanut butter but have not yet been recalled, we urge consumers to postpone eating these products until further information becomes available about whether that product may be affected.

We have been advised by manufacturers that product specific information may be available within the next few days. As of now there is no indication that the major national name brand jars of peanut butter sold in retail stores are linked to the PCA recall.

As the investigation continues over the weekend and in to the week, FDA will be able to update the advice based on new sampling and distribution information.

FDA is working closely with the members of the food industry to narrow this advice as rapidly as possible and to publicize a detailed list of implicated products as soon as possible.

FDA is encouraging manufacturers to help inform consumers about whether their products could have contained peanut paste from the Peanut Corporation of America.

Also if a manufacturer knows their products do not contain peanut paste from PCA, they should inform consumers of that fact.

Retailers should stop selling products which have been recalled. FDA will continue to closely monitor these events including working with the firms on the details of their actions, conducting follow up audits and inspection which may include collaborating with other federal, state and local regulatory agencies monitoring the process of the firm's actions.

And notifying our foreign regulatory counter parts of products that may have been distributed internationally. That concludes my statement and now I will turn it over to Dr. Robert Tauxe of CDC to make an opening statement.

Robert Tauxe: Yes, good afternoon, this is Dr. Tauxe. CDC has been collaborating with public health officials in many states as well as the Food and Drug Administration in investigating this outbreak.

As of 9:00 pm yesterday evening a total of 474 persons infected with the outbreak strain of salmonella typhimurium have been reported from 43 states.

For those persons from whom data were available, 23% were hospitalized and the infection may have contributed to 6 deaths. The most severe illnesses are in the very young, the elderly and the immuno-compromised.

For those persons where the available - with available information, the beginning of their illness was between September 8th and January 2nd 2009.

The - I would remind you that we do expect a two to three week delay between when someone gets sick and when they would be reported to us as being part of the outbreak.

That means the 21 cases reported in the last day became ill two to three or even longer - even more weeks ago. It can take five to seven days to culture a person or a food for salmonella and determine whether the salmonella is of the outbreak strain.

CDC with our state partners is continuing to identify and interview the new cases, the ill persons that are part of this outbreak to clarify the types of peanut butter containing foods that are associated with the outbreak, CDC is currently conducting a second national case control study.

Our state partners are also collecting and testing various peanut butter containing foods. Thank you very much.

Stephanie Kwisnek: Thank you Dr. Tauxe. At this time, ladies and gentlemen we would like to take your questions and as always to be fair to everyone. Please limit yourself to one question and one follow up question and please state your name and affiliation.

Operator, we'll take the first question.

Coordinator: Thank you. We'll now begin the question and answer session. If you would like to ask a question. Press star 1. Please unmute your phone and record your name clearly when prompted. Your name is required to introduce your question.

Our first question will come from Miriam Falco. Please state your affiliation.

Miriam Falco: Hi, Miriam Falco, CNN Medical News. I have a question about the statement that Dr. Sundlof made about companies that know that their products do not include products from PCA should make that known too.

How and where, and it seems right now that the consumer's at the mercy of companies coming forward and making the announcement that their products do include paste or peanut butter from PCA as Kellogg's did.

So that's not much for the consumer to go by. What are the people who are wondering if they should be eating the peanut butter they have in their house or the peanut butter cookies, what should they be doing?

Stephen Sundlof: Okay, well people - well what we are suggesting here is that if the products are known to be part of the recall and those products should be up on our website, we're asking people to discard those, destroy those, get them out of the household.

For other products that aren't - that contain peanut butter but it's not yet clear whether or not those may contain the recalled products from PCA, we're asking folks not to consume those at this time until we have additional information.

And we expect to have - we expect to be updating those lists on a daily basis. We've asked the manufacturers to go back and take a look at their products and determine first of all whether or not they contain any materials from PCA.

Secondly check the - to check the lot codes that are the ones under recall and make sure that none of their products contain peanut paste or peanut butter from those lot codes.

So we can start getting a much better and clearer picture as to which products should be recalled and which products should not.

Stephanie Kwisnek: Do you have a follow up question Miriam?

Miriam Falco: Well for clarification, so wouldn't it be simpler to say stay away from peanuts - any product that could contain peanut butter or peanut paste?

Because you don't know or you're not making it known what other companies are out there that manufacture these products. I mean not everybody goes to the FDA website to get this kind of information.

Supermarkets - you say a lot of the PCA stuff isn't sold in supermarkets, but it's a lot harder to walk down the cookie aisle and sort out which is and isn't sold including the PCA products.

So is there a simpler way to do it or are you trying to protect the industry so that you know you don't have the same problems you had last year with the salmonella tomatoes and then it was the jalapenos.

Stephen Sundlof: Yeah, well what we are - what I said in my opening statement is that we urge consumers to postpone eating any products that may contain peanut butter until additional information becomes available.

And we're trying to be as accurate as possible. It appears that the Peanut Corporation of America is relatively small in the amount of peanut products that it distributes.

And so the majority of products containing peanut butter we are learning and we will need to confirm this, but we've been receiving information that the majority of the products out there that do contain peanut paste or peanut butter are manufactured with products that do not come from PCA.

And so again we are urging people not to eat products that contain peanut butter until we have better information and then they can make an informed choice.

Stephanie Kwisnek: Thank you, operator, next question?

Glen Nowak: Operator? This is Glen Nowak from CDC. Dr. Tauxe would like to add something.

Stephanie Kwisnek: Please, Dr. Tauxe?

Robert Tauxe: Yeah, just I'd like to add that the - this issue is an excellent illustration of just the complexity of an ingredient driven outbreak when an ingredient is used in a number of different foods and is used widely throughout the food industry.

And that makes this more complicated and somewhat more - the time frame for finding out the information is somewhat more prolonged than a simple outbreak.

Stephanie Kwisnek: Thank you Dr. Tauxe. Operator, we'll take the next question.

Coordinator: Our next question will come from Elizabeth Weise. Please state your affiliation and your question.

Elizabeth Weise: Hi, it's Beth Weise with USA Today, thanks for taking my call. Two questions, first for Dr. Tauxe, of these and what was the number, 400 and what are we up to, 474 possible people ill so far.

Do you have a sense of what percentage of them got sick after eating peanut butter from King Nut and what percentage of them presumably were eating products containing peanut butter or peanut paste? And then I have a follow up.

Robert Tauxe: Yes, thank you for the question. Very few people that have been interviewed remember explicitly eating King Nut label peanut butter because that's not - it's - since it's sold largely through institutions, they might not know the brand of an institutional peanut butter that they did consume.

Some of the people we've interviewed were in institutions and a far larger number were going to school or the universities or were getting some meals in institutions like that.

And - but at this point we're not able to say what fraction might have been caused by King Nut, that's a difficult estimate for us because people just don't know which food it was, which peanut butter it was they ate when they had an institutional meal.

Elizabeth Weise: Well that's part of a broader question I was trying to get to is do we have a sense of are most people getting sick eating products that contain peanut butter and peanut paste or are they getting sick actually eating regular peanut butter?

And I ask that because I've been looking at all the studies I can find and it's unclear if for example baking a peanut butter cookie kills the salmonella.

So I'm wondering peanut butter paste in a peanut butter sandwich cookie where the paste is not cooked as opposed to a peanut butter cookie where it is cooked, do we have any sense on if there is a difference?

Robert Tauxe: Thank you Beth Weiss for the question. Let me say that we are conducting the second case control studies as we launched today.

In order to have a much better sense of the proportion of cases that might be accounted for by peanut butter versus some of these other products.

And part of that also as you say is that some of the products have been heat treated, other products have not been heat treated and our epidemiological measures may help to shed some light on that.

I don't know whether Dr. Sundlof would want to comment on the heat treatment effect of peanut butter - salmonella in peanut butter.

Stephen Sundlof: Yes, this is Dr. Sundlof and I will talk a little bit about that. We know that heat - that salmonella in peanut butter where there is very little water - I talked a little bit about this yesterday, about the salmonella being very stable in that kind of environment.

And following the peanut butter outbreak of salmonella a couple years ago, there was some research that was conducted to look into the heat processing and whether or not that would be sufficient to remove or destroy salmonella.

And what was found was that it took temperatures up to 250 degrees in order to kill the salmonella in peanut butter at an effective rate.

And so that's fairly high temperature. Now you normally would bake cookies at maybe 350 or 375 degrees.

But what generally happens is that the center of those cookies is cooler than the temperature that you're baking them at and may not even achieve that level.

So there's no guarantee that consuming heat-treated products containing peanut butter is - will protect them from becoming infected with the salmonella.

Elizabeth Weise: Thank you.

Stephanie Kwisnek: Operator, we will take one more question today.

Coordinator: Ricardo Alonso - I'm sorry, I don't have your full last name. Please state your affiliation.

Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar: Thank you. Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar with the Associated Press. Thanks for taking my question. And I wanted to ask Dr. Sundlof, does FDA have authority on its own to order a recall of products that were made using ingredients from the PCA plant? And I have a follow up.

Stephen Sundlof: The FDA does not have mandatory recall authority. When we do ask for recalls we rely on the manufacturers to conduct those recalls. In the event that the manufacturer refuses we have other authorities where we could stop the sale of those products, do things like seize products and join the firm from continuing in commerce.

But to answer your question specifically we do not have direct recall authority. We have asked the Congress for that authority and we are - we continue to work with them on that.

Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar: Now if you had that direct recall authority, how would you be handling this outbreak differently?

Stephen Sundlof: Well one of the points that we have to be able to establish that the product is adulterated. So we would still have to go through all of the laboratory testing and determine that salmonella was in the product.

We are very close to that right now and again then I suppose you know since we don't have mandatory recall authorities it would depend on how the law was written.

But certainly there needs to be a certain level of evidence that the product is actually adulterated. We think we are there at this point, we are still doing some additional laboratory confirmation.

But it appears with all the evidence that we have that the PCA product do contain salmonella at some level that is getting through into the food supply and warrants a recall.

Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar: Just a clarification, have you matched the outbreaks strain to the factory in Blakely Georgia?

Stephen Sundlof: We have not made that connection yet, however even if we - if it turns out that we find a different strain of salmonella, the product would still be adulterated.

Stephanie Kwisnek: Thank you Ricardo. And thank you ladies and gentlemen, that concludes today's media conference. Thank you for your participation. The replay will be available in about an hour and will last until January 24th.

If you have any follow-up questions, please contact the respective agencies and please check both the FDA and CDC websites for updated information.

Have a good weekend.

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