

USDA warns CA poultry producer linked to outbreak

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Body

The Agriculture Department is threatening to shut down three California poultry processing facilities linked to a salmonella outbreak that has sickened 278 people across the country.

USDA said Wednesday that Foster Farms, owner of the three facilities, has until tomorrow to tell the department how it will fix the problem. The company was notified Monday.

Sampling by USDA in September showed that raw chicken processed by those facilities included strains of salmonella that were linked to the outbreak. But the company has not recalled any of its products.

In a letter to Foster Farms, USDA said those samples coupled with illnesses suggest that the sanitary conditions at the facility "could pose a serious ongoing threat to public health."

The first illnesses in the outbreak were reported in March and the outbreak has had a high rate of hospitalizations. The CDC said 42 percent of victims were hospitalized, about double the normal rate, and it is resistant to many antibiotics, making it a more dangerous outbreak.

The Agriculture Department can halt production by withdrawing government inspectors who are required to be in meat processing plants every day. In the letter, Yudhbir Sharma of USDA's Alameda, Calif. district office said Foster Farms has failed to demonstrate that it has adequate controls in place to address the salmonella issue. He said that in one of the facilities, 25 percent of the samples taken were positive for salmonella.

The letter said that prior to the outbreak, USDA inspectors had documented "fecal material on carcasses" along with "poor sanitary dressing practices, insanitary food contact surfaces, insanitary nonfood contact surfaces and direct product contamination."

In a statement Monday, Foster Farms President Ron Foster said the company regretted any illnesses and was taking steps on its own to ensure food safety. He said the company is working with USDA.

According to CDC, the most recent illness began two weeks ago and the outbreak is ongoing. The majority of illnesses have been in California but people in 17 states have been infected, from Texas to Michigan to North Carolina. The USDA had originally said the outbreak was in 18 states.

So far, despite other evidence they have gathered, USDA and CDC have not been able to definitively link the illnesses to a specific Foster Farms product. Washington State found outbreak strains of salmonella in a leftover sample of raw Foster Farms chicken in an ill person's home, but USDA officials say they weren't able to decipher the label on the chicken, so they could not prove which of Foster Farms' specific products caused the illnesses.

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The CDC said the salmonella illnesses appear to be linked to another Foster Farms outbreak last year and earlier this year, when 134 people in 13 states were sickened with one of the same strains of salmonella that has made people ill in the current outbreak.

Even though the meat hasn't been recalled, some grocery stores are taking it off their shelves anyway. Kroger Co. said it is taking some Foster Farms products from the shelves in certain stores and calling customers who it knows may have purchased the products. The company owns several chains, including Ralph's, Fred Meyer, Fry's and others.

Salmonella is a pathogen that contaminates meat during slaughter and processing, and is especially common in raw chicken. The infections can be avoided by proper handling and cooking of raw poultry.

The pathogen can be life-threatening to those with weakened immune systems and causes diarrhea, abdominal cramps and fever within a few days of eating a contaminated product.

Consumer advocates have for several years petitioned the department to change the way salmonella outbreaks in meat are handled. Because salmonella is so prevalent in poultry and is killed if consumers handle and cook it properly, the government has not declared it to be a so-called "adulterant," or illegal, in meat, as is E. coli. Outbreaks of salmonella in poultry can take longer to discover and recalls don't happen as quickly.

If the outbreak had been E. coli, or if the salmonella had been found in food that wasn't meat, then the government would have had more authority to force a recall. That's because USDA, which oversees meat safety, classifies most of the main types of E. coli as illegal. The Food and Drug Administration oversees the safety of most other food and doesn't distinguish pathogens in foods salmonella is treated as seriously as any other contaminant.

With the evidence they have, withdrawing meat inspectors and shutting down the plant is the best regulatory recourse the agency has, officials said. If USDA decided to force a recall, it would most likely have to go through the courts.

The federal shutdown has also been hampering the government response to food safety issues. While USDA's meat inspectors are on the job, the CDC had furloughed many of those who work to investigate outbreaks. But the agency recalled many of those workers Tuesday to work on the salmonella outbreak.

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