FDA: Put Up or Shut Up

By LINDSEY COBLENTZ, Associate Editor, Food Manufacturing

Food recalls are constantly in the news, and lately, it almost seems as though recalls due to processing and packaging chemicals are becoming more and more frequent. Recent recalls like the Kellogg cereal fiasco [1] are leaving consumers wondering who is watching their food. Maybe the better question is: Who *should* be watching their food?

When push comes to shove, the FDA should be the one to monitor the safety of our food. After all, it is the *Food* and Drug Administration, so shouldn't that be its job? With a self-proclaimed mission to protect public health, including ensuring the safety of the nation's food supply, it sounds to me like it is the organization for the job.

Despite my deep respect for the food industry, food manufacturers are simply too biased when it comes to anything put in their food or packaging. Chemicals put into food have the potential to directly affect bottom lines, and, like any company, food producers are likely to resist accepting blame if something does go wrong.

The inability for food manufacturers to remain objective was clearly evident in the Kellogg incident. Before it even announced the recall, Kellogg allegedly performed its own testing and then destroyed any tainted packaging that could have been used as evidence and tested by the FDA.

According to a Kellogg spokesperson [2], it did not "destroy the packaging." In that case, I would like to know where the tainted packing went. Maybe Kellogg just accidentally lost the packaging, or maybe the chemicals caused it to vaporize. One would think that if samples were available the FDA would improve its image and credibility by testing them, so Kellogg's claims seem suspicious to me. Congress seems to think so, too, as it has now launched an investigation into the incident.

Even in cases where food manufacturers perform their own testing, the public often sees this as biased research, and it is not taken seriously. For example, when Kellogg discovered its packaging issue, it immediately gathered all suspect materials and conducted chemical tests. When it confirmed the packaging could pose a health threat, it destroyed all remaining suspicious materials to prevent them from going back into production. While this was the responsible action to take, the media and the public construed this to be evasive, suggesting that Kellogg was hiding evidence. Even Congress was suspect and has now launched an investigation into the incident.

Government regulators do not face these challenges. Though, while the FDA is the most suitable choice to regulate the food and chemical industries, it is not without its flaws. The FDA is in the dark about many of the chemicals that go into our food and currently only requires manufacturers to provide chemical information on a voluntary basis. That simply isn't good enough. If the FDA wants to provide food oversight, it needs to do its own testing on chemicals *before* they are put into food and packaging — whether the manufacturers okay it or not.

The agency will also have to change its approach to tackling food safety issues in order to be seen as a respectable regulator. Currently, the FDA seems to be evasive when it comes to crisis situations. For example, when Kellogg submitted its own health risk assessment, the FDA would not even release the document. And the agency essentially knew nothing about the chemical in question (2-mehylnaphthalene) or its possible effects on human health, yet it did not perform its own tests on the substance. In fact, the FDA gave the situation the brush off, saying the chemical "is not supposed to be in food." So what? Shouldn't that mean the agency should want to do more testing? If something were in my food and it wasn't supposed to be there, I would want an explanation. I think most consumers would agree.

It is time for the FDA to take its rightful place as the watchdog of the food and chemical industries, but this game of pointing fingers at manufacturers and hoping for voluntary information has to stop. The administration needs to step up and do its own testing, develop solid guidelines and enforce them. Otherwise, its speeches about protecting public health and safety will be nothing more than hot air.

For another view on the topic, check out Editor Krystal Gabert's column in tomorrow's Chem.Insider.

Do you think the FDA should have more of a presence in food safety, or do you think the food industry can handle this on its own? Share your thoughts at Lindsey.Coblentz@advantagemedia.com *[3].*

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