

Meat Plant Not Clean After Listeriosis Outbreak

OTTAWA — A top-to-bottom scrubbing after a deadly listeriosis outbreak apparently didn't fully cleanse a Maple Leaf Foods plant of mould, slime and meat debris, newly released documents show.

Inspectors found a troubling lack of hygiene at the company's Toronto facility just weeks after it reopened last year from a temporary shutdown for cleaning, according to inspection reports.

Maple Leaf says inspectors were looking more carefully at the plant after the listeriosis crisis, so naturally they found more problems.

And the company's chief food-safety officer, Dr. Randy Huffman, said Maple Leaf put in place more than 200 new standard operating procedures after the listeriosis outbreak but it took workers time to learn them. He said that through that learning process the company has continuously improved its approach to food safety.

Huffman said there was never any reason to be worried about the safety of the food produced at the plant.

The head of the federal food inspectors union said, however, that some of what the inspectors reported seeing at the time were "things that people should be concerned about."

Maple Leaf closed its Bartor Road deli-meat plant for nearly a month last year after its products tested positive for a bacteria called *Listeria monocytogenes*. Twenty-two people died and many more fell ill after eating tainted meat from the plant.

During the plant's closure, the company invited television crews to film workers in what looked like hazardous-material suits dismantling and sterilizing equipment, while the other areas were coated in a foamy disinfectant.

Hundreds of employees also spent hours in training sessions learning about cleanliness and the bacteria.

Company president Michael McCain held a news conference when the plant reopened on Sept. 18, 2008, and acknowledged the experts who worked tirelessly to sanitize the facility and its many meat slicers.

But during a checkup less than a month later, Canadian Food Inspection Agency staff found mould on the walls and floor, slime underneath a meat-trimming table, leftover meat on wheeled container bins and rusty equipment.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

The infractions are listed on an inspection report dated Oct. 10, 2008. They include:

- slime on part of the meat-trimming table in the curing room;
- meat debris on two steel container bins and unidentified debris on the brine tank in the curing room;
- a moist and mouldy cardboard sheet on the base of a skid in the curing room that holds bags of salt;
- mouldy caulking on the walls of the meat-defrosting room;
- a stack of dirty, mouldy and broken skids left in the frozen packoff room during cleaning;
- food debris on knife holders, floor and meat containers in the formulation room; and,
- rust on equipment used to process mock chicken.

The Canadian Press obtained that inspection report and others under the Access to Information Act.

The food-inspection agency issued a corrective-action request during the Oct. 10 checkup. Corrective-action requests state the nature of the problem and give the company up to 60 days to fix it.

When the inspector returned on Oct. 20, the mould was gone and many other problems had been fixed.

But another report says during visits on Oct. 20 and 21, an inspector watched as "an employee in a grey jacket lifted a floor broom over a finished food product conveyor belt during operation to sweep in between the conveyors."

Then on Oct. 22, the inspector saw a worker using a fork lift to move ready-to-eat link sausages from the cooler to a line for packaging. The report notes the meat at the bottom part of the lift "was not protected for the potential wheel over spray or splash cross contamination."

The inspector deemed the lift "as being in unsanitary condition," and also noticed a "green chemical liquid" pooling on the floor in the area where the machine was stored.

In subsequent checkups that month, the inspector reported that the rust had been sandblasted from the mock chicken equipment, and other problems had been fixed.

But more issues turned up during another visit on Dec. 12.

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The inspector found small chunks of meat on a conveyor belt and on the buttons that operate it. A worker struggled to clean the equipment as the inspector looked on.

"He cleaned it three times to bring it to acceptable level, first two times he missed pieces of meat on the conveyor belt," the report says.

Pieces of meat were also found on the frame of a brine tank in the curing room, and meat and dirt were stuck to a broken stuffing machine in the kitchen.

Huffman, Maple Leaf's top food-safety officer, told The Canadian Press that finding mould on the facility's walls after such a thorough scrubbing is "not acceptable," though he couldn't explain how the fungus escaped the cleaners' mops in the first place.

Huffman said the more than 200 new standard operating procedures put in place after the listeriosis outbreak were a "a lot for a company to take on all at once," but that the objective "is to continuously improve and to implement best practices throughout our facilities."

"That's what we've been doing for that last 14 months. The issues that you've been asking us about did occur approximately a year ago. We've continuously improved in that facility, and we're very proud of the track record and the progress that's been made."

The federal food inspectors' union found some of the infractions troubling.

"We're talking about a broom being taken from being used on the floor and now sweeping over top of finished product. We're talking about wheels on carts used to move finished product that are exposed and are flinging contaminated moisture up onto finished product," said union head Bob Kingston.

"Those are things that people should be concerned about. And there's a fair amount of repetition here, too."

While not every infraction found at the Bartor Road plant posed an imminent food-safety threat, Kingston said, he's surprised a company that had been through a high-profile Listeria outbreak didn't hold itself to a higher standard of hygiene.

"In a normal operation that had not been through what they had been through, that might be a common occurrence," he said. "But in this facility, it's very surprising that that would still be there. Because you would expect it to be spotless."

The fallout of the listeriosis crisis touched governments and industry.

The outbreak prompted the federal government to strengthen its food-safety protocols. It's now mandatory for companies to report all positive Listeria findings to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and facilities have to test more often for possible contamination.

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The tainted-meat scandal also set off a flurry of probes.

Perhaps the most high profile was an arm's length investigation by former Edmonton health chief Sheila Weatherill. Her team spoke to more than 100 people and amassed some five million pages of information during a six-month probe and still couldn't answer every question, like how many meat inspectors there are in Canada.

Other reports by Health Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Ontario government and a House of Commons subcommittee studying food safety identified other shortcomings.

Throughout the ordeal, Maple Leaf won plaudits for owning up to its error and making a heightened commitment to food safety its cause celebre.

The company apologized and agreed to pay up to \$27 million to settle class-action lawsuits. Maple Leaf has also instituted more rigorous testing for the Listeria bacteria in plants producing ready-to-eat meat.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/26/2015 - 5:39am):

<http://www.chem.info/news/2009/11/meat-plant-not-clean-after-listeriosis-outbreak>