FDA Warns Egg Firm over Bacteria … Again

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IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — A company that promised to clean up Iowa's egg industry after a nationwide salmonella outbreak in 2010 said Friday that a recent government safety inspection discovered the bacteria in two of its barns and that it took steps to protect consumers.

Centrum Valley Farms said in a statement issued to The Associated Press that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration found the strain of bacteria known as salmonella heidelberg in two of six poultry houses that were tested at its production facility in Clarion, Iowa, during a routine inspection in May. The company said the presence of the bacteria in the barns did not mean any eggs were tainted, but that it nonetheless diverted an unspecified number from the market "in the interest of egg safety."

The company said the eggs were withheld until they tested negative for the bacteria four times and were eventually approved for sale by the FDA.

The plant is under strict oversight because it was one of several in northern Iowa implicated in the 2010 outbreak, which led to the recall of more than 500 million eggs nationwide and sickened an estimated 2,000 customers. During the outbreak, the plant was owned and controlled by Jack DeCoster, an egg magnate with a long history of food safety, labor and environmental violations. Centrum Valley Farms took over management of DeCoster's operations in Iowa last year, vowing to improve them.

In an Aug. 14 warning letter, the FDA said it was concerned about the presence of salmonella heidelberg or SH in Centrum Valley Farm's poultry houses, warning it could enter chickens' organs and end up in their eggs.

"SH has caused several egg-associated outbreaks resulting in human illness and at times death. Given this body of evidence, FDA considers SH within a poultry house environment to be a public health threat," according to the letter from John Thorsky, director of FDA's Kansas City regional office. "We acknowledge that you have been working with FDA to address this situation."

Chief Operating Officer Steve Boomsma said in the statement that Centrum Valley was in the process of responding to FDA's findings, which also included several deficiencies in its testing for salmonella and its salmonella prevention plan.

"Providing safe, high-quality eggs to Centrum Valley Farms customers is our obligation," he said. "We have already taken corrective actions."

Salmonella is the most common bacterial form of food poisoning, causing diarrhea, abdominal cramps and fever within days of eating a contaminated product. It can

be life-threatening. Salmonella heidelberg is a different strain than the more common salmonella enteritidis blamed for the 2010 outbreak. Federal investigators found the presence of both strains on DeCoster's farms after the outbreak.

In its letter, FDA noted that Centrum Valley had promised several improvements, and that its inspectors would be looking for verification of them during their next visit.

Iowa is by far the nation's leading egg producer, with more than 50 million egg-laying hens that produce about 14 billion eggs per year.

Centrum Valley hailed its takeover of DeCoster's operations as a step toward repairing consumer confidence after the outbreak. It vowed to bring in new management teams to improve egg safety and compliance with environmental, animal care and disease prevention programs.

Centrum Valley says its eggs are sold at major retailers across the country under a variety of brand names, but it would not identify its customers. On its website, the company says that its "environmental testing and compliance procedures are over and above" those required by the FDA.

But the FDA said otherwise in its warning, which found "serious violations" of rules that went into effect in 2010 to prevent salmonella in the production, storage and transportation of shell eggs. The rules require mandatory testing for the bacteria at different stages of production. Companies that find salmonella in their poultry houses must either conduct additional testing over several weeks and destroy the bacteria or divert the eggs to non-food use.

The FDA said Centrum Valley was failing to test for salmonella in the environment when hens were 14 to 16 weeks of age and 40 to 45 weeks of age as often as required, and that its contract technician was not collecting enough samples for testing. Centrum Valley also failed to maintain records showing compliance with refrigeration requirements for eggs and had a salmonella prevention plan that was incomplete, the letter said.

The FDA said the violations rendered the eggs adulterated because they "have been prepared, packed, or held under insanitary conditions whereby they may have become contaminated with filth."

The letter gave Centrum Valley 15 working days to issue a response outlining "specific things you have done or plan to do to correct these violations and prevent their recurrence." The response has not yet been filed.

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