# NM Peanut Capital at Heart of National Recall

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — The country's largest organic peanut processing plant is scrubbing its facilities top to bottom and hopes to get back in production soon after massive recall of scores of products linked to a salmonella outbreak.

The recall has affected peanut butter and nut products sold at major retailers around the country, raising concerns about the long-term impact on the industry — especially in products grown and processed in the flat, dusty eastern New Mexico town of Portales.

The region is home to the prized Valencia peanut, which represents just a small percentage of the nation's massive peanut crop, but is favored for natural and organic peanut butter products because of its sweet flavor.

This year's crop is exceptional, growers say, and the town is set this weekend to celebrate its crop at its 39th annual peanut festival. But the festivities are likely to be overshadowed by anxiety as the crop is piling up in drying trailers while the Sunland Inc. facility linked to the outbreak remains shuttered for a top-to-bottom

scrubbing.

"We are very concerned about it," said Wayne Baker, a retired peanut farmer and chair of the New Mexico Peanut Growers Association. "The harvest is going on as normal and Sunland is receiving peanuts, but we have got to get the FDA to approve some changes and get going."

Sunland, which operates the country's largest USDA certified organic peanut processing plant, first closed its peanut butter plant late last month when the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention linked a salmonella outbreak to peanut butter it produced for Trader Joe's. Its roasting and processing facilities were also closed and the recall expanded this month to include peanuts and other nut butters after the FDA found salmonella at the plant.

Though the illnesses have only been linked to the Trader Joe's product, Sunland Inc., which manufactures products for Target, Costco and other major retailers, has recalled everything made in the plant since March 2010 — more than 300. The recall affects many peanut butters labeled natural or organic, but does not include major brands like Jif, Skippy or Peter Pan, meaning there are plenty of other brands on the market to fill the void for customers amid the plant's shutdown.

The National Peanut Board says it is too soon to know if publicity about the recall is impacting sales of peanut butter and related products overall. But spokesman Ryan Lepicier said after a 2009 salmonella outbreak in peanut butter that resulted in a national recall of some 4,000 products, "there was a short-term light impact but within a few months peanut butter sales grew month after month" for several years, outpacing sales before the recall.

He noted that Sunland is a smaller producer that makes a lot of private label products that are sold primarily on the West Coast.

Still, Cornell University food science professor Bob Gravani says "consumers are going to be wary." He noted that some companies that sell bagged spinach are still recovering from a national recall several years ago.

"Whenever there is a foodborne outbreak people get a little concerned," he said. "A lot of people eat peanut butter and certainly there is a backlash even for companies producing a clean product."

Indeed, news of the recall gave Albuquerque resident Holly Dockstader pause.

"I haven't even heard about it," she said as she prepared to shop at Trader Joe's with her three young children. "I am out of peanut butter. But I guess I won't be buying it for a while."

The recall has not impacted consumer supplies. Trader Joe's, for instance, still has shelves full of its brand's peanut and other nut butters from lots not associated with the recall. And peanut growers around the country are currently harvesting a bumper crop.

Sunland hopes to reopen its peanut processing and roasting facility within a week to 10 days. But it could be six to eight weeks before peanut butter production resumes, said Sunland spokeswoman Katalin Coburn. And those estimates assume approval from regulatory agencies.

The plant's nearly 150 workers all remain employed, she said, working to scrub and upgrade the facility. And she said the peanut harvest continues, with the crop being stored in drying trailers until the plant gets back up and running. Coburn said peanuts store well, as the once yearly harvest provides peanuts for production throughout the entire year.

"The plant is being torn down as it was, and when it is put back together it will include many new pieces of equipment and improved controls," Coburn said.

Coburn said experts are still trying to pinpoint how the contamination occurred.

"We have had extensive, inclusive processes that are designed to prevent anything getting into commerce that can possibly be harmful," she said. "The entire investigation is centered on exactly where there may have been a mistake, where signs were not properly interpreted. And analyzing that data is what is taking so long."

Peanut butter was identified by the FDA as a high-risk food after a 2007 outbreak that sickened more than 400 people who ate peanut butter processed at a ConAgra facility in Nebraska. ConAgra officials blamed moisture from a leaky roof and a faulty sprinkler system for mixing with dormant salmonella bacteria in the plant.

After that outbreak, the FDA stepped up investigations of peanut facilities.

As part of that process, problems had been found previously at the Sunland plant in Portales. FDA records show two inspections at the plant in 2009 and 2010 found "objectionable conditions," but classified the findings as not meeting the agency's threshold for action. According to the records, any corrective action on the part of the company was voluntary. But details of the objectionable conditions or why the agency visited the plant twice in two years were not released.

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