Problems Found at Peanut Butter Plant in 2010

MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Food and Drug Administration found what it called "objectionable conditions" at a New Mexico peanut butter plant in 2010, two years before the current outbreak of salmonella poisoning linked to Trader Joe's peanut butter produced there.

The FDA said Friday that a recent inspection found salmonella in the plant which produced Trader Joe's Valencia Creamy Peanut Butter and many other nut butters and nut products for several large national grocery chains. The Trader Joe's peanut butter is now linked to 35 salmonella illnesses in 19 states — most of them in children under the age of 10.

Though the illnesses have only been linked to the Trader Joe's peanut butter, New Mexico-based Sunland Inc. has recalled everything made in the plant since March of 2010 — a total of 240 products. The company last month recalled 101 products that were manufactured in the plant this year.

FDA has found problems at Sunland before. Agency 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. The FDA has not released details on what the objectionable conditions were or why the agency visited the plant twice in two years. An FDA spokesman said the agency is preparing to release that information. Sunland did not respond to requests for comment.

An FDA investigation conducted last month after the illnesses were linked to the plant found salmonella in environmental samples taken from various surfaces, officials said. The agency did not release any other details about current conditions at the plant. Washington state health officials also confirmed the presence of salmonella in an opened jar of the Trader Joe's peanut butter found in a victim's home, the FDA said.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday that officials now count 35 salmonella illnesses in 19 states across the country that can be traced to the Trader Joe's peanut butter. The greatest numbers of illnesses were in California and Texas, which each reported five illnesses.

Salmonella can cause diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps 12 hours to 72 hours after infection. It is most dangerous to children, the elderly and others with weak immune systems. Those sickened reported becoming ill between June 14 and Sept. 18, according to the CDC, and 63 percent were children under the age of 10. No deaths have been reported.

Brandi Henson's four year-old son Jackson was one of those victims after he ate

peanut butter his mother bought at a Trader Joe's in Shrewsbury, Mass. Just two days after Henson brought her third child home from the hospital, Jackson started complaining he didn't feel well. What followed was five days of unbearable cramps and diarrhea, and Henson said it was a month before he felt like himself again. Health officials in Massachusetts later linked Jackson's infection to the Trader Joe's peanut butter.

Henson said she tries to shop at stores like Trader Joe's for better ingredients, and she didn't think something like this could happen. She is now suing Sunland and Trader Joe's because she says she wants to hold them accountable.

"We especially buy organic and all natural foods as much as we can because we're trying to protect our kids and be healthy, and to know that the food we're buying is tainted, we just don't want that to happen," she said.

Many of the brands included in the recall are labeled organic or "all natural," and major peanut butter brands like Jif, Skippy and Peter Pan are not a part of it. An The recall includes nut butters and nut products sold at Whole Foods Market, Target, Safeway, Costco, Fresh & Easy, Harry and David, Sprouts, Heinen's, Stop & Shop Supermarket Company, Giant Food of Landover, Md., and several other stores since 2010.

Some of those retailers used Sunland ingredients in items they prepared and packaged themselves or sold the peanut butter in jars labeled with a store brand. Some stores and companies that used Sunland products as ingredients have issued additional recalls.

The products recalled include peanut butters, almond butters, cashew butters, tahini, and blanched and roasted peanut products. The expanded recall this week added several varieties of flavored butters and spreads, including Sunland's Thai Ginger Butter, Chocolate Butter and Banana Butter. Brand names included are Target's Archer Farms, Safeway's Open Nature, Earth Balance, Fresh & Easy, Late July, Heinen's, Joseph's, Natural Value, Naturally More, Peanut Power Butter, Serious Food, Snaclite Power, Sprouts Farmers Market, Sprouts, Sunland and Dogsbutter.

An outbreak of salmonella in peanut butter in 2008 and 2009 linked to one company and thousands of products sickened 714 people in 46 states.

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Online: Full list of recalled items:
www.fda.gov/Food/FoodSafety/CORENetwork/ucm320413.htm *[2]*

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