Four Charged in Salmonella Outbreak Plead Innocent

JAMES L. ROSICA & KATE BRUMBACK,Associated Press

ALBANY, Ga. (AP) — Four people charged in connection with a 2009 salmonella outbreak in peanuts that killed nine and sickened hundreds pleaded not guilty Thursday to all charges.

Peanut Corporation of America owner Stewart Parnell, his food broker brother Michael Parnell, Georgia plant manager Samuel Lightsey and Georgia plant quality assurance manager Mary Wilkerson entered their pleas in a south Georgia federal court.

A 76-count indictment charges the four defendants in a scheme to manufacture and ship salmonella-tainted peanuts.

The outbreak caused one of the largest recalls in history and prompted the government to file criminal charges, rarely pursued in food poisoning cases because intentional contamination is difficult to prove.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Thomas Langstaff set bond at $100,000 each for the Parnell brothers, $50,000 for Lightsey and $25,000 for Wilkerson. The defendants and their family members, who attended Thursday's hearing, did not speak to reporters.

The case next goes to U.S. District Judge W. Louis Sands. A trial date has yet to be set.

Among the various charges are conspiracy, mail fraud, wire fraud and the introduction of adulterated and misbranded food into interstate commerce with the intent to defraud or mislead.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Kenneth Dasher told the court that Stewart Parnell faces a maximum 754 years in prison and $17 million in fines if convicted. His brother Michael faces a maximum 437 years and $10 million.

The indictment said the company misled consumers about salmonella being in its product, even when laboratory tests indicated its presence. It said certificates accompanying some of the peanut shipments were altered to say the peanuts were safe when tests said otherwise.

The indictment also says Stewart Parnell, Lightsey and Wilkerson gave false or misleading statements to federal food investigators who visited the plant as the outbreak was unfolding, resulting in obstruction of justice charges.

The company later went bankrupt.

Investigations are pending into two other large outbreaks in recent years — an outbreak of salmonella in eggs in 2010 and an outbreak of listeria in cantaloupe in 2011 that was linked to more than 30 deaths.

Rosica reported from Albany and Brumback from Atlanta.

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