Multiple Violations For Listeria-Linked Plant

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DOVER, Del. (AP) — State and federal inspectors have found multiple problems since 2000 at a Delaware dairy facility whose operations were recently halted because of a deadly food-borne bacteria outbreak, but they found no evidence of listeria contamination at Roos Foods in Kenton until a few weeks ago.

State health officials issued a cease-and-desist letter on Feb. 28 ordering the company to halt all activities related to milk and dairy products. That followed a Food and Drug Administration investigation prompted by a disease outbreak that killed one person in California and sickened seven others in the Washington, DC, suburbs in Maryland.

"As far as we're concerned, the plant is shut down," Jamie Mack, director of community environmental health services for Delaware's Division of Public Health, said Thursday.

Mack said state officials still have not received complete inspection reports from the FDA, which were requested last month.

"As far as I know, they're just not ready to release that information yet," he said, adding that the FDA typically does not notify state officials of planned inspections or provide the inspection reports unless asked.

Repeated attempts to contact company representatives for comment, including an attempt Thursday, have been unsuccessful.

The listeria illnesses were diagnosed from August through November of last year, all among Hispanics, according to federal officials. In Maryland, a health official said last month that state residents who were sickened had recovered, and that there had been no new confirmed cases.

Roos Foods issued a voluntary recall Feb. 23. for cheese products shipped to other states under the Mexicana, Amigo, Santa Rosa De Lima and Anita brands. The recall was expanded a few days later to include its Crema Pura Mexicana Cultured Sour Cream products sold in Delaware.

On Tuesday, the FDA suspended the company's registration, prohibiting it from introducing products into interstate or intrastate commerce. The FDA action came after an investigation by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, along with state and local health officials, linked the listeriosis outbreak to cheeses manufactured by Roos Foods.

During a two-week inspection that concluded last week, FDA officials collected

environmental samples from different areas of the Kenton facility, including the cheese processing room and production equipment. Twelve swabs tested positive for listeria monocytogenes, the bacterium that causes listeriosis. Further analysis showed that 11 of those swabs had the same listeria "fingerprint" as the outbreak strain.

Inspectors also found several other problems, including a leaking roof that allowed water to drip onto cheese processing equipment and storage tanks, processing equipment and storage vats with rust holes, uncapped openings in milk storage tanks and piping, and food residue on equipment that had been cleaned.

Those problems are similar to ones found in previous inspections, according to state and FDA officials.

FDA spokeswoman Juli Putnam said in an email Thursday that Roos Foods was inspected 10 times between 2000 and 2013, and that listeria monocytogenes was not found during any of those visits. Six of the inspections were classified as requiring no action, while four called for voluntary action to address what typically are considered technical violations.

During a July 2010 inspection, FDA officials observed insects in the manufacturing areas, standing water on production floors, condensate on surfaces above food contact surfaces and deteriorated surfaces on food processing equipment.

But none of 37 environmental swabs that were tested indicated the presence of listeria.

Similarly, samples of semisoft finished cheese products analyzed during FDA inspections in 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008 also were negative for pathogens, including listeria.

During a June 2013 inspection, FDA officials noted condensate on surfaces above food contact surfaces and equipment, refrigeration not being monitored, and buildings and fixtures not maintained in a sanitary condition.

While the FDA inspections involved production of cheese shipped in interstate commerce, state health officials are responsible for inspecting Roos Foods' sour cream production operation.

"It's physically separate, the two areas," Mack explained. ".... You have to walk through a small room and then a hallway to get from the cheese side to the sour cream side."

Inspections of the sour cream area conducted by state officials in 2012 and last year found a variety of mostly minor problems, including storage and labeling issues and rough areas on equipment that needed to be smoothed out to ensure proper cleaning. An inspector also noted "numerous flies throughout milk plant" in August 2012, and the company was told last December to clean up trash and clutter around a garbage bin that could attract pests.

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