



Peanut Butter Recall: A Case Study in Food Safety

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Key Points:

- **Food contamination is a widespread problem but can be mitigated through successful risk-management programs that include stringent processes and controls, traceability and transparency measures, and detailed recordkeeping.**
- **In 2008, a specific brand of peanut butter used as an ingredient by many of the nation's largest food manufacturers was identified as the likely source of a salmonella outbreak that led to one of the largest, most complex, and costliest food recalls in U.S. history.**
- **The tainted peanut butter sickened hundreds of people in 46 states, and was blamed for at least nine deaths.**
- **More than 3,900 food products manufactured by more than 200 companies had to be removed from retailers' shelves.**
- **The economic losses from the salmonella outbreak are estimated to have topped \$1 billion, excluding the cost of medical treatment for those infected by the bacteria and the cost of the related lawsuit settlements.**
- **The Food Safety Modernization Act, signed into law on Jan. 4, 2011, aims to establish standards that will prevent contaminated food products from entering the market.**

Introduction

Food borne illness is a perpetual risk for consumers, growers, and processors. During the past few years, contaminations of spinach, melons, eggs, peanut butter and other foods have all made headlines. When an outbreak occurs, the same players and processes are mobilized to identify and remedy these health dangers. The purpose of this report is to present a case study of one such outbreak – tainted peanut products in 2008-09 – to illustrate how food contamination occurrences are handled, discuss the impact on the food supply chain, and offer suggestions for growers, producers and processors about how to handle a recall.

In fall 2008, federal health officials learned of a salmonella outbreak in 12 states. Soon, a second outbreak popped up on the radar screen of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It appeared that the salmonella bacteria in both outbreaks were similar. But CDC researchers didn't know the answer to a key question: What was causing dozens of people around the country to fall ill?