

Fax Transmittal Cover Sheet



*San Lee
recall*

United States Department of Agriculture
Office of Communications

Andy Solomon, Deputy Press Secretary
Telephone: (202) 720-4623
Fax: (202) 720-5043

Date: 1/22/99

Name & Affiliation of Recipient: Tom Freedom / Mary Smith

Recipient's Fax #: 456-7431 No. Pages, Incl. Cover: 4

Message: Q FSIS Q+A re San Lee recall

Questions and Answers on the Bil Mar/Sara Lee Recall

January 21, 1999

Q: When did this recall start?

A: Sara Lee/Bil Mar voluntarily recalled the product December 22 based on CDC illness reports. At the time of the recall, neither USDA nor CDC had any intact product test results that showed the products contained the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*, although samples had been taken and were being analyzed.

Q: What did the test results show?

A: FSIS conducted 12 tests of product. All FSIS tests came back negative. CDC reports it has isolated the bacterium with the outbreak serotype 4b from a previously unopened package of hotdogs, and another strain in deli meats.

Q: What time frame of production is covered by the recall? How much product has been recovered?

A: Product recalled is from June 28, 1998, up until the date that they ceased production of the product in question (December 19, 1998). Bil Mar reports that approximately 4.5 million pounds has been recovered and destroyed to date. However, Bil Mar's recovery efforts are ongoing.

Q: What products are included in the recall?

A: Hot dogs and other packaged meats labeled with EST. P-261 or 6911 for Ball Park, Bil Mar, Bryan Bunsizes and Bryan 3-lb. Club Pack hot dogs, Grillmaster, Hygrade, Mr. Turkey, Sara Lee Deli Meat and Sara Lee Home Roast brands with "sell by" dates before Feb. 25, 1999.

Q: What is the government's role?

A: An interdisciplinary team made up of CDC, FSIS and state and local health departments are continuing an investigation of plant operations and the Listeriosis outbreak. CDC continues to gather epidemiological information and FSIS is conducting compliance checks to ensure the recall is effective. For example, FSIS compliance officers checked to determine that distributors of these products were notified of the recall. FSIS is also looking very closely at plant operations so that when the plant reopens all its production lines, it does so with assurances that product produced is safe.

Q: Is the plant operating? What is the company's role?

A: The plant has not produced the product in question since December 19. Under the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points system, the plant is responsible for examining its processes, investigating where contamination may have occurred, and modifying their processing controls to address any problems. The plant must validate the modified controls through hold and test sampling of production lots to ensure that no unsafe food enters commerce. (Hold and test sampling means all product is held until test results are received.)

FSIS will verify corrective actions implemented by the plant through direct observation, sampling of products produced and auditing of the plant's entire operations.

Q: Will Bil Mar be fined?

A: FSIS does not have the authority to levy civil penalties. The Clinton Administration has asked for such authority, and it is included in legislation recently reintroduced by Sen. Tom Harkin (S. 18).

Q: Was the recall voluntary? Is Sara Lee/Bil Mar cooperating?

A: As FSIS does not have the authority to mandate recalls, all recalls are voluntary. The Clinton Administration has asked for such authority, which

is included in legislation recently reintroduced by Sen. Tom Harkin (S. 18).

Bil Mar initiated the product recall on the basis of the CDC data linking illnesses to hot dogs but prior to identification of the epidemic strain of listeria in a Bil Mar product.

Q: Have consumers been adequately notified?

A: Bil Mar issued and widely distributed a press release on December 22 and FSIS posted a recall notification report on its Web site. News stories ran nationwide on TV and in newspapers. The issue has received almost daily press coverage ever since. Additionally, USDA's meat and poultry hotline has received hundreds of calls from consumers and prepared a recorded message for people calling after hours. On January 20, Sara Lee published full-page ads in 60 newspapers (according to news accounts) reminding consumers not to eat and to return any products in question to the point of purchase for a refund.

Q: How many people have become ill or died due to the nationwide Listeriosis outbreak?

A: In a January 21 press release, CDC reports 67 illnesses and 14 deaths caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*, serotype 4b.

Q: Is the government planning further research?

A: Prior to the recall, FSIS and the Food and Drug Administration agreed to conduct a risk assessment on *Listeria*, because so much is not understood about how *Listeria* gets introduced into and affects food products and how cross-contamination occurs.

Q: What is the incubation period for listeriosis after eating a product containing the bacteria?

A: It can take 3-4 weeks after consuming a listeria-contaminated product before a consumer becomes ill with listeriosis.