Five Things to Know About the Foster Farms Salmonella Outbreak

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Hundreds — maybe thousands — of antibiotic-resistant salmonella illnesses are linked to a California chicken producer. The outbreak has been going on for over a year, and none of the company's products have been recalled.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says there were 50 new reported illnesses linked to Foster Farms of Livingston, California, in the past two months, bringing the total number of cases to 574. Most of the illnesses were in California.

Five things you should know about this outbreak:

CENTERED ON THE WEST COAST

Seventy-seven percent of those sickened were in California, but illnesses were reported in 27 states and Puerto Rico, including a handful on the East Coast, Alaska and Hawaii. Neither the Agriculture Department nor Foster Farms has released a comprehensive list of where the chicken was sold. Last year, Costco and Kroger-owned stores took Foster Farms products off their shelves. Neither company responded to a request for comment on whether they were selling it again.

Foster Farms also did not respond to a request for comment on retail outlets.

A HISTORY OF OUTBREAKS

Dealing with outbreaks is nothing new for Foster Farms. The company was linked to salmonella illnesses in 2004 and then again in 2012, before the current outbreak, which started in 2013.

In a letter from the USDA to Foster Farms last October, the department said inspectors had documented "fecal material on carcasses" along with "poor sanitary dressing practices, insanitary food contact surfaces, insanitary nonfood contact surfaces and direct product contamination."

In January, USDA inspectors briefly closed a Foster Farms plant after finding cockroaches.

The USDA said it is closely monitoring Foster Farms facilities and said measured rates of salmonella in the company's products have been going down. The department threatened to shut down Foster Farms' facilities last year but let them stay open after the company said it had made immediate changes to reduce

salmonella rates.

Foster Farms said this week it has put new measures in place, including tighter screening of birds, improved safety on the farms where the birds are raised and better sanitation in its plants. The company suggested the recent cases may have happened because salmonella incidence increases in the warmer months.

GOVERNMENT'S HANDS ARE TIED

Recalls of poultry contaminated with salmonella are tricky because the law allows raw chicken to have a certain amount of salmonella — a rule that consumer advocates have long lobbied to change. Because salmonella is so prevalent in poultry and is killed if consumers handle it and cook it properly, the government has not declared it to be an "adulterant," or illegal, in meat, as is E. coli. Outbreaks of salmonella in poultry can take longer to discover, and recalls don't happen as quickly.

Because of those rules, the USDA likely would have to go through the courts if it decided to force a recall.

In a statement, USDA spokeswoman Catherine Cochran said the outbreak "has persisted for far too long without a solution." She said the agency was continuing to investigate the illnesses, "including the possibility that they may be caused by other sources."

The CDC, however, said three-fourths of victims who were able to provide the agency with brand information said they had consumed chicken produced by Foster Farms before becoming ill.

The CDC's Ian Williams says there is a bit of good news: Officials are seeing a slow decline in the number of illnesses. "It suggests to us that they are starting to address the problem," Williams said.

KNOW YOUR SYMPTOMS

Salmonella causes diarrhea, abdominal cramps and fever within a few days of eating a contaminated product. It can be life-threatening to those with weakened immune systems, though no one has died in this particular outbreak. Cases are reported when those who are ill visit their doctors and the doctors send stool samples to labs that culture them and identify a particular strain.

Since that doesn't always happen, and because some cases may be mild, the CDC estimates there are probably 20 to 30 times more salmonella cases than are reported. That means this outbreak alone could have resulted in about 17,000 illnesses.

ABOVE ALL, COOK YOUR CHICKEN

Safe handling and cooking can eliminate the chance of salmonella poisoning. The

CDC advises that you wash your hands, utensils, counters and cutting boards before and after they come in contact with poultry. Separate raw poultry from other foods, cook it to 165 degrees Fahrenheit as measured with a food thermometer and chill it promptly.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/25/2014 - 12:46am*):
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