

New Plea For Former Manager In Salmonella Case

The Associated Press

ALBANY, Georgia (AP) — The former manager of a U.S. peanut-processing plant linked to a 2009 salmonella outbreak that killed nine people plans to enter a new plea Wednesday, according to a court filing.

Samuel Lightsey is set to appear in federal court in Albany for a change of plea hearing. Lightsey was the manager of Peanut Corporation of America's plant in Blakely, Georgia, and is accused of scheming to manufacture and ship salmonella-tainted peanuts.

Also charged in the case are Peanut Corporation owner Stewart Parnell, his food broker brother Michael Parnell, and Georgia plant quality assurance manager Mary Wilkerson.

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. The conditions at Peanut Corporation of America — and the employees' alleged attempts to conceal them — appear more pronounced than most.

The company's dirty processing plants were blamed for the outbreak that killed nine people and sickened hundreds. One plant was in Plainview, Texas, which the State Department of Health Services closed Feb. 10, 2009, after product samples tested positive for salmonella.

Food and Drug Administration inspectors found bad conditions inside the processing plant in Blakely, Georgia, including mold, roaches and a leaky roof. According to e-mail uncovered by congressional investigators shortly after the outbreak, Parnell, who invoked the Fifth Amendment to avoid testifying before Congress in February 2009, once directed employees to "turn them loose" after samples of peanuts had tested positive for salmonella and were then cleared in another test.

The indictment unsealed in February 2013 says the company misled its customers about the existence of salmonella in its product, even when lab tests showed it was present. It says the co-workers even fabricated certificates accompanying some of the peanut shipments saying they were safe when tests said otherwise.

The company later went bankrupt.

The 76-count indictment charges the Parnell brothers and Lightsey with conspiracy, mail fraud, wire fraud and the introduction of adulterated and misbranded food into interstate commerce with the intent to defraud or mislead. Stewart Parnell, Lightsey and Wilkerson were also charged with obstruction of justice.

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The conspiracy and obstruction of justice charges each carry a maximum sentence of 20 years.

Lightsey and the others all pleaded not guilty to the charges in February 2013. The notice setting Lightsey's change of plea hearing does not say what charges will be addressed at the hearing or whether he has reached an agreement with prosecutors.

Lightsey's attorney did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment Wednesday.

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