Marijuana Edibles Need to Pass Food Safety Tests for Credibility

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In this June 19, 2014 photo, chef Alex Tretter adds strawberry jam to cannabis-infused peanut butter and jelly cups before baking them, at Sweet Grass Kitchen, a well-established gourmet marijuana edibles bakery which sells its confections to retail outlets, in Denver. Sweet Grass Kitchen, like other cannabis food producers in the state, is held to rigorous health inspection standards, and has received praise from inspectors, according to owner Julie Berliner.

(AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

DENVER (AP) — The marijuana in those pot brownies isn't the only thing that can potentially make consumers sick. The industry and regulators are taking a closer look at how pot-infused edibles are actually made.

The thriving edible marijuana industry In Colorado is preparing for new testing requirements — due to take in effect in October — to make sure the products are safe to eat and drink.

While consuming too much of an edible has been connected to at least one death and a handful of hospital visits since retail recreational sales began in January, officials say there have been no reports of anyone getting a food-borne illness from edibles.

Still, activists, producers and officials agree that safety testing is long overdue for a sector of the new pot market that, according to one industry estimate, has seen the sale of at least 8 million pieces this year.

Food safety testing is necessary "to building any sort of credibility for the industry ... to create that public confidence that we're not just a bunch of stupid kids throwing marijuana into cookies and putting them on the market," said Jazzmine Hall-Oldham, general manager of Bakked, which makes cannabis concentrates and pot-infused chocolate bars.

With federal help in regulating production nonexistent because the drug is illegal under federal law, state and local governments have had to assemble a patchwork of health and safety regulations for foods with cannabis.

The agency that regulates Colorado's marijuana industry, the state Department of Revenue, requires pot manufacturing facilities to meet the same sanitation requirements as retail food establishments, including adequate hand-washing and refrigeration.

But the question of whether the state's 51 licensed recreational edible-pot makers meet those standards is left to local health departments, said agency spokeswoman Natriece Bryant. State regulations requiring them also to pass tests for common food contaminants — such as E. coli and salmonella — don't take effect until the fall.

In Washington state, where retail sales are expected to begin the week of July 7, regulations call for samples of all marijuana sold for consumption to clear a "microbiological screening," whether it's in edible, smokeable or concentrate form.

The state's Liquor Control Board has adopted limits for how many "colony forming units" of molds, bacteria and yeast are considered acceptable, with zero tolerance for any presence of salmonella or E. coli.

Commercial pot kitchens in Washington must pass a state Agriculture Department inspection before people who make edibles can be licensed, and so far, only one such inspection has occurred. The results of that inspection haven't been released, and there will likely be no marijuana-infused brownies, cookies or other edibles on pot-shop shelves when sales begin.

In Colorado, for now it's a case of buyer-beware when eating foods including cannabis.

In Denver, where most of Colorado's edible-pot producers are located, health officials have been meeting with the businesses to explain new city requirements that edible marijuana processing facilities get inspected at least twice a year, the same as restaurants.

Denver's manager for food safety inspections, Danica Lee, showed about 50 industry workers examples of bad food-prep sanitation — bottles of bleach on the food-prep surface and improperly stored utensils — and warned that they could face steep fines or even lose their licenses if they fail repeated inspections.

"We're treating your industry like any other subset of the food industry," Lee told

the edible pot makers.

Hall-Oldham and other processors at the meeting seemed to welcome stricter oversight. Josh Fink, a former pastry chef who owns Medically Correct, which makes cannabis-infused candies and protein bars, said most of the people who are getting into the edibles business don't have a food preparation background.

"They might know how to make four muffins at home but not 40,000 muffins at a time. That's where the training comes in," Fink said.

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