

Son of Victim to Attend Deadly Salmonella-Tainted PB Trial

Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The son of a Minnesota woman who died after eating tainted peanut butter hopes a trial in Georgia sends a message to food manufacturers that there can be serious consequences for peddling contaminated food.

Seventy-two-year-old Shirley Almer, of Perham, was among the nine people who died in a salmonella outbreak traced to Peanut Corporation of America. The company's head and two others go on trial this week.

After successfully battling lung cancer and a brain tumor, Almer ate bad peanut butter while being treated for dehydration at a Brainerd hospital.

Since his mother's death in 2008, Jeff Almer has pushed for stricter safeguards. He's been one of the leading voices calling for prosecutions, and says he plans to travel from the Twin Cities to attend parts of the trial.

A federal indictment unsealed in February 2013 brought charges against the head of Peanut Corporation of America and several others stemming from the outbreak tied to peanuts processed by the company. It was an unusual move by the federal government, which rarely prosecutes companies in food poisoning cases.

Federal investigators found filthy conditions at the company's Georgia plant and said the employees even fabricated certificates saying peanut product shipments were safe when tests said otherwise.

Company owner Stewart Parnell invoked the Fifth Amendment to avoid testifying before a congressional committee in February 2009. Emails obtained by congressional investigators showed that he once directed employees to "turn them loose" after samples of peanuts tested positive for salmonella and then were cleared in another test.

Several months before the outbreak, when a final lab test found salmonella, Parnell expressed concern to Georgia plant manager Samuel Lightsey, writing in an Oct. 6, 2008, email that the delay "is costing us huge \$\$\$\$\$."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found 714 people in 46 states were infected between September 2008 and March 2009. There were three deaths in Minnesota, two in Ohio, two in Virginia, one in Idaho and one in North Carolina.

The 76-count indictment charged Parnell and his food broker brother Michael Parnell with conspiracy, mail fraud, wire fraud and the introduction of adulterated and misbranded food into interstate commerce with the intent to defraud or mislead.

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Stewart Parnell and Georgia plant quality assurance manager Mary Wilkerson were also charged with obstruction of justice.

Lightsey pleaded guilty in May to seven counts. He will be sentenced at a later date.

Food and Drug Administration inspectors found bad conditions in the company's plant in Blakely, Georgia, including mold, roaches and a leaky roof. Another plant in Plainview, Texas, was shuttered by that state's Department of Health Services in February 2009 after product samples tested positive for salmonella.

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