

Ex-Peanut Plant Manager Says He Lied About Salmonella

KATE BRUMBACK, Associated Press

ALBANY, Ga. (AP) — A former manager of a south Georgia peanut processing plant blamed for a deadly salmonella outbreak lied to federal investigators to protect the company he worked for but decided to come clean after realizing how many people had been sickened, he testified Thursday.

Food and Drug Administration investigators were inspecting the Peanut Corporation of America plant in Blakely in January 2009. Samuel Lightsey said he lied to those investigators about positive tests for salmonella in the company's product and about the frequency of testing done at the plant.

"I was trying to play damage control, trying to protect the company," Lightsey testified at the trial of his former boss and company owner Stewart Parnell, and two others.

Parnell and his brother, food broker Michael Parnell, are accused of shipping tainted products to customers and covering up lab tests showing they contained salmonella. Stewart Parnell and the plant's quality assurance manager, Mary Wilkerson, also are charged with obstructing justice.

Lightsey managed the plant from July 2008 until the company went bankrupt following the outbreak in 2009 and was the top manager, reporting directly to Stewart Parnell. He pleaded guilty to seven criminal counts in May after agreeing to testify for prosecutors in exchange for a lighter sentence. He's been on the stand for about four days, and defense attorneys have not yet had a chance to question him.

He initially thought the salmonella outbreak was relatively limited in scope when he started lying to investigators. But when he saw the number of people sickened begin to rise, he decided to tell the truth, he said.

The outbreak in late 2008 and early 2009 sickened more than 700 people and killed nine — three in Minnesota, two in Ohio, two in Virginia, one in Idaho and one in North Carolina. It prompted one of the largest food recalls in U.S. history.

An FDA investigator testified last week that Lightsey initially told inspectors that the plant had had a false positive salmonella test, and it wasn't until the fifth day of the investigation that Lightsey admitted three positive tests in the previous year. The FDA finally took the unusual step of asking for two years of records that showed lab tests had confirmed salmonella in 12 lots of product from the plant since 2007. The FDA inspection led to the southwestern Georgia plant being shut down.

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Jurors also heard on Thursday from two employees of the Georgia Department of Agriculture and a microbiologist from the FDA, as well as a microbiology supervisor from an FDA regional lab in Arkansas. The judge granted a prosecution request to suspend Lightsey's testimony for the first part of the day Thursday to allow those four witnesses to testify out of order.

FDA microbiologist Darcy Brillhart described to the jury the process of taking environmental swabs from the throughout the plant in early January 2009. Of the 92 swabs he and another microbiologist took, two from the floor of the plant tested positive for salmonella.

Brillhart testified about various precautions taken to make sure the samples aren't contaminated or compromised, including wearing protective clothing, using sanitized gloves, keeping the samples at a specified temperature and using specially treated swabs.

Scott Austin, a defense attorney for Stewart Parnell, grilled Brillhart, seeking to discredit him by questioning the fact that he didn't wear shoe coverings during the plant inspection, kept samples overnight in a hotel fridge where he had no control over the temperature and took few notes.

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