

Extra Jurors Take a Seat in Deadly Salmonella Outbreak Trial

RUSS BYNUM, Associated Press

ALBANY, Ga. (AP) — After three days of jury selection, a panel with plenty of extra members was seated Thursday to hear the case of three people charged in connection with a deadly salmonella outbreak traced to a southwest Georgia peanut plant five years ago.

The U.S. District Court trial of former Peanut Corp. of America owner Stewart Parnell; his brother and foodbroker, Michael Parnell; and the peanut plant's quality control manager, Mary Wilkerson, is expected to last at least two months. Because of that timeline, the judge made sure six alternates were selected in addition to the required 12-member jury.

Most criminal trials have a couple of alternates seated to fill in for any main jurors who are dismissed in the middle of case because of illness or any other reason. But six is an unusually large number of alternates. In total, 10 men and eight women were chosen, and they were not told which were alternates. Four of the 18 had to take seats outside the jury box Thursday.

"Let's hope it's enough," Judge W. Louis Sands told attorneys. "If we have a trial and no alternate is needed, it will be a true miracle."

The Parnell brothers and Wilkerson are charged in a 76-count indictment with shipping tainted peanuts and covering up lab results that showed peanuts testing positive for salmonella. Stewart Parnell and Wilkerson also were charged with obstruction of justice.

In 2009, authorities traced salmonella that killed nine people and sickened more than 700 to Peanut Corp.'s plant in Blakely, Georgia. The outbreak prompted one of the largest food recalls in history. The dead were from Minnesota, Ohio, Virginia, Idaho and North Carolina.

The judge said prosecutors alone expect to take eight weeks to present evidence in the case. During jury selection, Assistant U.S. Attorney Alan Dasher read a list of 128 possible prosecution witnesses — though he said it's unlikely all will testify.

It was unknown how many witnesses defense attorneys plan to call.

After three full days of jury selection, jurors were announced Thursday morning, then dismissed for the day at lunchtime. Prosecutors and defense attorneys were scheduled to make opening statements Friday morning.

Georgia plant manager Samuel Lightsey pleaded guilty in May to seven criminal

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

counts after reaching a deal with prosecutors. He will be sentenced later and is likely to be called as a witness against the other three defendants.

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

Source URL (retrieved on 04/19/2015 - 5:29pm):

<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/08/extra-jurors-take-seat-deadly-salmonella-outbreak-trial>