

Former Manager of Ga. Peanut Plant 'Scared' By Salmonella Test

RAY HENRY, Associated Press

ALBANY, Ga. (AP) — The former manager of a peanut processor linked to a deadly outbreak of salmonella testified Tuesday he was "scared to death" the first time he saw a lab test had identified the deadly pathogen in a product.

Samuel Lightsey continued testifying as a prosecution witness against his former boss at Peanut Corp. of America, Stewart Parnell, and two others.

Lightsey said he had 17 years of experience in quality control for the food industry before joining Parnell's firm. The first time he ever saw a positive test for salmonella was in August 2008, not long after he joined Peanut Corporation, he said.

"I never had one before," Lightsey said, explaining why he emailed a memo detailing the problem to company officials. "I just wanted to make sure, let everyone know what was going on."

After an outside lab identified salmonella during routine testing, Lightsey said he warned a customer not to use the peanut product and prevented the shipment of suspect goods from the company's processing facility in Georgia. The factory flushed its peanut processing lines with hot oil in an attempt to kill the bacteria. Lightsey said Parnell told him to ship the goods after additional tests did not find salmonella.

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 Georgia plant's quality assurance manager, Mary Wilkerson, also are charged with obstructing justice.

Their company is blamed for a 2008-09 salmonella outbreak that caused one of the largest food recalls in U.S. history. Food safety investigators found more than 700 people across the country were infected and nine people died — three in Minnesota, two in Ohio, two in Virginia, one in Idaho and one in North Carolina.

Defense attorneys have not yet started their questioning of Lightsey, who managed the plant from July 2008 until the company went bankrupt following the outbreak in 2009. He pleaded guilty to seven criminal counts in May after agreeing to testify for prosecutors in exchange for a lighter sentence.

The jury saw email exchanges between company officials discussing poor conditions inside the plant.

In one email, sales representative David Voth learned a peanut product was not

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

ready for shipment because it violated standards limiting coliform bacteria, commonly found in human and animal digestive tracks. While not all coliform bacteria are harmful, a positive test suggests fecal contamination has tainted food products.

Wilkerson wrote the problem was caused by mice inside the processing plant.

"No way... seriously? Who is our pest control?? We need to get them in and have a little pow wow...," Voth wrote, according to a copy of the email introduced by prosecutors as evidence.

Source URL (retrieved on 03/06/2015 - 3:50pm):

<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/08/former-manager-ga-peanut-plant-scared-salmonella-test>