

# Inspection reports from peanut plant varied widely

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BLAKELY, Ga. – A Georgia health inspector who toured the peanut butter plant now at the center of a national salmonella outbreak noted only two minor violations in October. Less than three months later, federal inspectors found roaches, mold, a leaking roof and other sanitation problems.

Food safety experts say the lapse is a major concern and shows state inspectors are spread thin and might need more training on how to spot unsanitary conditions.

"It's surprising to me that that many major deficiencies were observed at one time, and none of these were picked up previously," said Michael Doyle, head of the food safety center at the University of Georgia.

In October, state inspector Donna Adams noted only two violations in her report on the Peanut Corp. of America plant: tote containers with butter residue and "black buildup" and "mildew and possibly some static dust on ceiling of butter storage room."

No samples of the finished product were taken for salmonella testing during the October inspection, despite a push by the state to check for the bacteria after a salmonella outbreak was traced to another Georgia peanut butter plant in 2007.

The October report showing only minor violations seems to conflict with conditions observed by at least one former employee, though others said they saw no problems.

Jonathan Prather, who said he worked in the plant's peanut butter room until he and most of the plant's other employees were recently laid off, said he sometimes saw old and soggy peanuts being used and other unsanitary conditions. When he raised concerns about the plant's cleanliness, Prather said he was ignored by managers.

"The only thing they said is, 'We'll handle this, we'll handle the problem,'" he said. "But I don't see that they did because if they had, none of this would have happened."

Another former employee, Jimmy Boozer, said he worked at the plant for six years and never noticed any unsanitary conditions. Co-worker Lewis Smith, who had been working at the plant for about two years, said the plant appeared generally clean. One problem Smith noticed was a roof that leaked for months and continued to leak even after plant managers said it had been repaired.

A leaky roof would likely cause some concern for inspectors: After the 2007 salmonella outbreak was linked to a Georgia peanut butter plant operated by ConAgra Foods Inc., company officials said jars were contaminated when moisture from a roof leak and a malfunctioning sprinkler system mixed with dormant salmonella bacteria in the plant.

Adams, who inspected the plant twice last year, did not come to the door to speak to a reporter who visited her home in southwestern Georgia. A man who identified himself as her husband referred all questions to the state.

Georgia agricultural officials did not immediately return repeated phone calls Friday. Earlier in the week, Agricultural Commissioner Tommy Irvin defended his inspectors, saying they did the best they could with limited manpower and funding.

Irvin said the department has about 60 inspectors responsible for examining 15,000 sites — or 250 food sources per inspector — ranging from ice machines to sprawling factories. Some territories are left uncovered, forcing the state to shift employees from one area to another.

Peanut Corp. did not respond to several requests asking for details of plant operations. The company issued a general statement late Friday that emphasized its top concern continues to be ensuring public safety.

"For Peanut Corporation to engage in any discussion of the facts at this point is premature," the statement said.

The Food and Drug Administration said Friday it had asked the Justice Department to launch a criminal investigation into Peanut Corp., which authorities say shipped products that initially tested positive for salmonella after retesting and getting a negative result.

At least 529 people have been sickened as a result of the outbreak, and at least eight may have died because of it. More than 430 products have been recalled.

The 29-year-old Prather painted a grim picture of the facility, describing managers more concerned with the company's bottom line than with properly cleaning the plant and equipment.

He said both soggy peanuts and peanuts in packages marked with dates showing they were five or six years old were dumped into the production line. The American Peanut Council, an industry trade association, says peanuts need to be kept dry to prevent mold and other risks.

Prather also said a dry roaster at the plant was halted only one day a month for cleaning. Doyle, the food safety expert, said peanut roasters should be cleaned and sanitized at least once a week.

"What they needed to do and what they didn't do is clean up right," said Prather, who noted the plant was sometimes shut down for cleaning on the weekends but said that wasn't enough.

Doyle, who has been asked by the American Peanut Council to help review the industry's practices, said the state would likely have to provide inspectors with "more in-depth training in terms of the really critical areas."

And he said it's a problem that likely spans far beyond Georgia.

"It's something the federal government is going to have to take a lead role on, to develop criteria for different producers," Doyle said. "I think this peanut plant is just an example of the weakness in our system."