

Lab tests show possible salmonella at Texas plant

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ATLANTA – Private lab tests show there may have been salmonella at a second plant operated by the peanut company at the center of a national outbreak, but the potentially tainted products were not sent to consumers, Texas health officials said Tuesday.

The Peanut Corp. of America temporarily closed its plant in Plainview, Texas, Monday night at the request of health officials after the tests found "the possible presence of salmonella" in some of its products, the Texas Department of Health said in a statement.

The Texas plant produces peanut meal, granulated peanuts and dry roasted peanuts. Texas state health officials said that possibly contaminated peanut meal and granulated peanuts had not been sent to customers. Potentially contaminated dry roasted peanuts were shipped to a distributor, but were caught before reaching the public, state officials said.

The company is being investigated in connection with an outbreak that has sickened 600 people and may have caused at least eight deaths. More than 1,840 possibly contaminated consumer products have been recalled.

Peanut Corp. closed its plant in Blakely, Ga., last month after federal investigators identified that facility as the source of the salmonella outbreak. Company spokeswoman Amy Rotenberg did not immediately return a call seeking comment Tuesday.

The Texas closing came a day after the FBI raided the company's plant in Georgia, hauling off boxes and other material. Agents executed search warrants at both the plant and at Peanut Corp.'s headquarters in Lynchburg, Va., according to a senior congressional aide with knowledge of the raids. The official spoke only on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

During their investigation at the Georgia plant, Food and Drug Administration inspectors found roaches, mold, a leaking roof and other sanitation problems. They also found two strains of salmonella. Though different from the outbreak strain, the discovery of the bacteria at the plant signalled a hole in food safety.

The FDA said last week the company knowingly shipped salmonella-laced products from the Georgia plant after tests showed the products were contaminated. Federal law forbids

producing or shipping foods under conditions that could make it harmful to consumers' health.

FDA spokeswoman Susan Cruzan said the agency is still investigating the Plainview facility. It was not immediately known if the discovery would lead to broader product recalls. Cruzan said the FDA is searching records to see where products from the Plainview plant may have been distributed.

"The FDA has collected its own samples and is awaiting lab results," Cruzan said. Initially, agency officials had indicated that the salmonella problems seemed to be limited to Peanut Corp.'s Georgia plant.

An Associated Press investigation last week revealed that the Texas plant, which opened in March 2005 and was run by a subsidiary, Plainview Peanut Co., operated uninspected and unlicensed by state health officials until after the company came under investigation last month by the Food and Drug Administration.

Doug McBride, spokesman for the Texas Department of State Health Services, said Peanut Corp. agreed to shut the plant voluntarily as it works with the state agency.

Plainview Mayor John Anderson said Tuesday the Texas plant employed about 30 people. It was not immediately clear how they would be affected by the suspension.

"I'm just very sorry to hear that," Plainview Mayor John Anderson said Tuesday when a reporter called with news of the suspension. "Hopefully it's just a temporary suspension. That'd be the best of all worlds."

The company, which also operates a small plant under the name Tidewater Blanching in Suffolk, Va., sold its peanut butter to institutional clients, such as nursing homes, and its peanut paste to many other companies that used it as an ingredient in products ranging from cookies and ice cream to energy bars and pet treats. While the company initially said its products weren't sold directly to consumers, it said Sunday that some were sold directly to discount retailers.

Food safety attorney Bill Marler, one of several attorneys who have filed civil lawsuits against the company since the outbreak started, said it was the latest disturbing turn for Peanut Corp.

"It is clear that PCA is not a producer that companies could — or can — rely on for a safe product," he said.