

US shutdown cripples investigation of salmonella outbreak

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11 October 2013

An outbreak of Salmonella poisoning had sickened 278 Americans in 18 states, mostly centered in California, as of October 7. The source of the bacteria has been traced by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to three Foster Farms chicken plants in California, Oregon and Washington. In the face of this, the government agencies responsible for conducting inspections and investigations into foodborne diseases are prohibited from conducting their work—or even entering their offices—as a result of the shutdown of the US government.

Of the 12,825 employees of the CDC, 8,754 have been furloughed. In a remarkable comment, CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden posted a statement on his twitter feed: “CDC had to furlough 8,754 people. They protected you yesterday, can’t tomorrow. Microbes/other threats didn’t shut down. We are less safe.”

Frieden stated that the pause in the CDC’s work is causing potentially permanent damage to research and crippling the CDC’s ability to track foodborne diseases and other infectious illnesses. “If an experiment was set up in the lab, a project was started, it may be that it could be stopped and resumed, but it may also be that there’s real damage to that.”

A CDC staffer told Maryn McKenna of *Wired* on Monday, “I know that we will not be conducting multi-state outbreak investigations. States may continue to find outbreaks, but we won’t be doing the cross-state consultation and laboratory work to link outbreaks that might cross state borders.”

McKenna added: “That means that the lab work and molecular detection that can link far-apart cases and define the size and seriousness of outbreaks are not happening. At the CDC, which operates the national foodborne-detection services FoodNet and PulseNet, scientists couldn’t work on this if they wanted to; they have been locked out of their offices, labs and emails. (At a conference I attended last week, 10 percent of the

speakers did not show up because they were CDC personnel and risked being fired if they traveled even voluntarily.)”

On Monday, the US Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) issued a “notice of intended enforcement” to the CEO of Foster Farms chicken producers. The notice threatened to remove FSIS inspectors from the three plants, which would mean the plants would be required by law to close.

Foster Farms’ response was a press release claiming to be working with the FSIS and the CDC “to reduce incidence of Salmonella Heidelberg on raw chicken products” from the three factories. The company claims that it “has instituted a number of additional food safety practices, processes and technology throughout company facilities that have already proven effective in controlling Salmonella in its Pacific Northwest operations earlier this year.”

Despite the public health alert issued by the FSIS “due to concerns that illness caused by Salmonella Heidelberg is associated with chicken products produced by Foster Farms at three facilities in California,” no recall has been put into effect.

The company is conducting a cynical public relations campaign to enable it to conduct business as usual with impunity. It claims that despite the health alert and the FSIS “notice of intended enforcement,” the agency has publicly assured the safety of Foster Farms chicken. It adds, “Foster Farms chicken is safe to eat but, as with all raw chicken, consumers must use proper preparation, handling and cooking practices.”

Salmonella Heidelberg is an aggressive strain of antibiotic-resistant salmonella, which is responsible for outbreaks in 2004, 2012 and earlier this year. The disease can have lifelong consequences ranging from arthritis to kidney trouble to heart disease.

According to Monday’s alert, “On July 1, 2013, FSIS

was notified of a Salmonella Heidelberg cluster with Pulse Field Gel Electrophoresis (PFGE) pattern JF6X01.0258. Since that time, CDC has defined the outbreak to include six additional patterns ... as part of the case outbreak definition.”

It is widely known that the rampant overuse of antibiotics has contributed to strengthening the strain of Salmonella Heidelberg against antibiotics such as ceftriaxone as well as ampicillin and ciproflaxin, all important for treating young children against salmonella infections.

The CDC, like many other government agencies, has been operating under “minimal support,” and until Tuesday had only two of 80 foodborne pathogen-analyzing staff on duty, according to a report by ABC News.

As a last-minute measure, 30 CDC staff members were brought back on the job Wednesday to work on the case. The CDC gives investigatory backup to the FSIS, but as Director Frieden says, “We don’t have the systems up. We don’t have early warning systems as robust as they should be or could be.”

Since the shutdown, some research and reference labs have gone from staffs of 80 to as little as two. The CDC’s hospital-acquired infections phone line—which Frieden says receives about 100 calls a day—has also been shuttered. FSIS inspection staff is also crippled as a result of the shutdown, functioning at only 87 percent capacity.

On October 7, the CDC issued a report entitled, “Multistate Outbreak of Multidrug-Resistant Salmonella Heidelberg Infections Linked to Foster Farms Brand Chicken,” explaining the outbreak and that the investigation is ongoing. It is of concern that incidents occurring after September 1 may not yet be reported due to the two- to three-week timeline for reporting the illness. Clearly the shutdown of the investigatory body can have deadly consequences.



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