

Boar's Head closes Virginia plant responsible for listeria outbreak that killed 9 and hospitalized at least 57

Jane Wise

20 September 2024

Boar's Head is shutting down its Jarratt, Virginia, plant after a nationwide listeria outbreak was traced back to the facility. Nine people have died and 57 were hospitalized across 18 states since the beginning of the outbreak last July.

On September 13, Boar's Head Provision Company announced it is permanently discontinuing production of its Strassburger Brand Liverwurst, which was exclusively made at the Jarratt plant and identified as the source of the outbreak.

Boar's Head recalled 7 million pounds of meat after unopened products in multiple states which were produced at the Jarratt facility were found to be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

A total of nine deaths were reported across South Carolina, Illinois, New Jersey, Virginia, Florida, Tennessee, New Mexico and New York. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the recent outbreak is the largest outbreak since 2011 when a listeria outbreak linked to cantaloupe killed 33 people.

A statement from the company attributes the "root cause" of the listeria contamination to "a specific production process that only existed at the Jarratt facility and was used only for liverwurst." However, records obtained by CBS News through a Freedom of Information Act Request read like a chapter from Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle*, which depicted horrific conditions in the meatpacking industry due to corruption and lack of regulations.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, inspectors from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) cautioned that the Boar's Head plant was an "imminent threat" to public health in September 2022. At the time, inspectors reported that rust, condensation, mold, insects, and garbage were found on the walls and floors.

Experts noted that subsequent occurrences of unsanitary conditions in the facility should have triggered more stringent enforcement of food safety guidelines. Instead, conditions at the plant continued to deteriorate. Inspection reports reflect repeated and ongoing violations in the 24 months leading up to the listeria outbreak over the summer.

Just a few of the revolting findings within the facility included water dripping from ceilings that pooled on the floors, a leaky pipe repaired with plastic wrap, puddles of blood emitting a "rancid smell" in coolers, walls, and processing lines, and machinery caked with "heavily discolored meat buildup" as well as insects.

Sarah Sorscher, a food safety regulatory expert at the Center for Science in the Public Interest told the *Times* that federal inspectors "shouldn't have allowed this company to keep producing ready-to-eat products." She continued, "Consumers had to die before this plant got shut down."

Training documents for the USDA indicate inspectors who determine an "imminent threat," may take "immediate action," bypassing due process rules that govern enforcement.

According to a former microbiologist from the USDA, the facility should have been shut down in 2022. A consultant for the agency told the *Times* that if the USDA had removed its inspectors from the plant at that time, Boar's Head would have been prevented from continuing to distribute its products.

Listeria is a resilient organism found widely in the environment, including in soil and water. In healthy individuals, infection typically results in gastrointestinal symptoms.

However, for older adults, newborns, and those with weakened immune systems, it can lead to severe

infections with a fatality rate of approximately 17 percent. Additionally, it poses a serious risk to pregnant women, potentially causing miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, and life-threatening infections in newborns.

Unlike many bacteria whose growth is hampered by refrigerator temperatures, listeria thrives in cool temperatures making it the bane of the food industry. Deli meat processing is particularly risky, according to the USDA, because processed meats are typically consumed without being heated, a step that would kill listeria.

Speaking to the *New York Times*, experts noted that the practices used at the Jarratt plant were decades out of date. The plant relied only on sanitation procedures to deter the growth of listeria, though USDA guidelines released in 2015 recommend irradiation and other processes to kill the listeria bacteria.

Records released last week disclosed that after the listeria outbreak this summer, investigators found the company had insufficient controls to stop bacterial contamination from spreading and had no set guidelines for employees to protect against cross-contamination.

“You see multiple failures here — failures in design, failures in implementation,” Neal Fortin, director of the Institute for Food Laws & Regulations at Michigan State University told the *Times*. “It’s just shocking.” Fortin expressed surprise that the Boar’s Head plant was allowed to continue its operations for as long as it did with a safety plan that was entirely inadequate.

The closing of the Jarratt plant leaves 600 workers, among them 500 United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) members, without jobs or forced to relocate. The facility was the second largest employer in the area after Greenville State Correctional Center.

UFCW members will receive just eight weeks’ severance or a job at another Boar’s Head facility if they are willing to relocate, according to a statement from UFCW Local 400.

Boar’s Head offered employees the choice to either continue working at the company’s other processing center in Petersburg, Virginia, about 40 minutes away, or to transfer to one of its other facilities in Michigan, Indiana, New York, or Arkansas.

Jarrett is located about 60 miles south of the state capitol Richmond in a largely rural region. As of the 2020 census, just over 600 people live in the town, meaning that the sudden shuttering of the facility will be devastating for the area.

The plant’s closure will lead to a loss of nearly \$1 million in annual tax revenue alone as it was the county’s

largest consumer of its water and wastewater system.

Speaking to local news, Greenville County Administrator Dr. Charlette Woolridge said, “Boar’s Head has been a staple in the county of Greenville for over three decades, and its closure has sent shock waves, not only through Greenville but throughout the Southside Virginia region,” she said. “It has impacted our local economy, it affects our local businesses because you don’t have the consumer spending we once had.”

It is unknown whether Boar’s Head will incur any penalties from the USDA for its repeated noncompliance offenses. Reports published by the USDA indicate there have been no “enforcement actions” taken against the company in the past year.

While the USDA is responsible for oversight of daily operations at meat processing plants such as Boar’s Head, the agency relied on staff from Virginia, who were not USDA employees, to do inspections as part of the State Cooperative Inspections Program which allows state employees to do federal inspections.

The USDA, as with nearly all federal and state agencies that are intended to serve a public good, is woefully underfunded. The agency underwent a wave of deregulation and reorganization under the Trump administration.

Just two months into his term, President Trump called for a 21 percent cut in discretionary funding at USDA as part of his “skinny budget.” In 2018, Trump proposed a stultifying 25 percent cut across the entire USDA.

However, despite nearly four years of a Democratic administration under President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, the funding for the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has continued to languish.

Meanwhile Biden has led a bipartisan drive to fund the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians with the largest military budget in United States history. The \$825 billion allocated to imperialist wars has bled public health and safety funding dry, creating the conditions for increasing numbers of preventable illnesses and death.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact