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Tomatoes were initially thought to be responsible for the 2008 outbreak of Salmonella Saintpaul. The actual culprit was jalapeños. The new food safety law aims to prevent such episodes from recurring.

New federal law aims to improve food-tracking issues

by **TYLER MOSS**

Jan 20, 2011

In 2008, Americans shunned tomatoes.

For good reason: 1,400 of them in 43 states, including Illinois, contracted Salmonella Saintpaul, a rare strain of the disease. The outbreak, which killed two, initially was thought to have been spread through tomatoes. But after a four-month investigation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta linked the epidemic to jalapeños in contaminated salsa.

Experts think that such delays in tracing such outbreaks could be eliminated by the landmark Food Safety Modernization Act, signed into law by President Obama on Jan. 4.

Dr. David Acheson, managing director at Leavitt Partners, a health care and food safety consulting firm in Salt Lake City, said the problem with the Salmonella Saintpaul episode and similar foodborne epidemics is “inconsistency” in keeping records.

The new law will require firms to maintain records in an electronic format.

Food traceability is an important issue because the sooner regulators understand where a product comes

from, the sooner they can inform consumers what food to avoid and remove that item from circulation.

“There is a very clear public health benefit,” said Acheson, former chief medical officer at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition in College Park, Md.

“If you start to compound this out, you come up with dozens of places where the Food and Drug Administration has to get records - all inconsistent, no one using the same format, and more than half is paper. That is why [the Salmonella Saintpaul] outbreak just went on and why the trace back was so painful and slow.”

The FDA currently requires suppliers, manufacturers, warehouses and processors to keep track of where their food items and ingredients come from. However, there is no set rule as to where or how these records should be kept, which is extremely inefficient when investigators are trying to track the cause of a dangerous disease such as salmonella and E. coli.

“When the FDA needs to do a quick inquiry, it doesn’t have the capacity or the manpower to go to tens or hundreds of plants and walk through these facilities without the information being readily available,” said Jennifer McEntire, director of science and technology projects for the Chicago-based Institute of Food Technologists.

McEntire was the lead author of a report the FDA commissioned that examined the current food-tracing process and recommended guidelines to help establish a more comprehensive system to track the movement of products.

Among the report’s most significant recommendations was the suggestion that firms keep records that would be “available on request in electronic form in 24-hours,” McEntire said.

The new law also requires the FDA to establish at least two pilot programs in the produce and processed food areas. These pilots will look at the best way to implement technology in facilitating better lines of communication and record-keeping, Acheson said. The FDA has 18 months to complete these pilots before they report to congress on their findings.

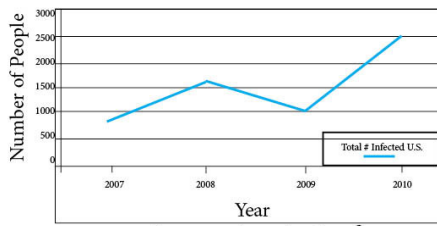
While the law will have a positive effect on traceability, McEntire believes it still fell short, as some aspects were not consistent with the report’s recommendations. For example, the law failed to require cases of food products to have tracking information posted on them, such as key dates and times.

“I don’t feel good about a system that wouldn’t require...labeling on a case,” McEntire said.

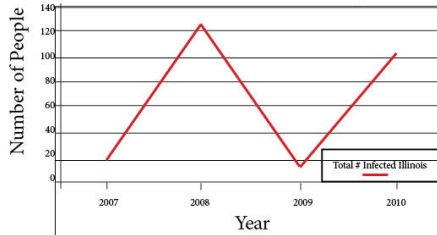
However, Bob Gravani, president of the Institute of Food Technologists and food scientist at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., said the bill is a “great step in the right direction.”

By pushing the bill through during a lame-duck session of Congress, legislators have shown that they really want this reform to happen, he said.

“The whole idea is to raise the bar - make systems more efficient so we can really follow these products. I think the level of sophistication is improving tremendously with all our electronic tools and abilities to track. It would be ideal if we could all get on the same page and allow for interconnectivity to occur. That is what we should strive for.”



Approximate # of Salmonella Infections by Year



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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U.S. and Illinois approximate total number of salmonella infections from 2006-2010.

United States salmonella outbreaks in 2010

Item	# of States with Reported Cases	# Individuals Infected	Duration
Alfalfa Sprouts	22	125	Nov. 1, 2010 - Jan. 11, 2011*
Shell Eggs	Multistate - Exact # Unknown	1,939	May 1, 2010 - Nov. 20, 2010
Cheesy Chicken Rice Frozen Entrée	18	44	April 11, 2010 - Aug. 27, 2010
Frozen Mamey Fruit Pulp	2	9	May 25, 2010 - Aug. 20, 2010
Mexican-style Fast Food Restaurant - Chain A	15	75	April 30, 2010 - July 18, 2010
Frozen Rodents (used for reptile feed)	17	34	Dec. 4, 2009 - June 9, 2010
Alfalfa Sprouts	11	44	March 1, 2010 - June 1, 2010
Red and Black Pepper/ Italian-Style Meats	44	272	July 4, 2009 - April 14, 2010

*Update as of Jan. 14, 2011. Investigation is ongoing.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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Outbreaks of salmonella in 2010, their duration, where they occurred and how many people they infected.