

Listeria: FDA finds problems at Ohio ice cream plant

May 21 2015, by Mary Clare Jalonick



In this April 24, 2015 file photo, a sign on a window at a Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams states that the store is closed, in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. A government investigation of Ohio-based Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams says there was inadequate testing and cleaning in its Columbus plant before listeria was found in some of its ice cream pints. (AP Photo/Tony Dejak, File)

A government investigation of Ohio-based Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams found inadequate testing and cleaning in its Columbus plant that had

become contaminated with listeria.

The company recalled all its products last month after listeria was discovered in some pints of Jeni's ice cream, and listeria was also found in the plant. There are no known illnesses connected to the recall, and Jeni's says it is making ice cream again and re-opening its shops Friday after intensive cleaning.

The Jeni's recall came as Texas-based Blue Bell Creameries also shut down and recalled all products after listeria in its products was linked to three deaths.

The Food and Drug Administration on Thursday released the results of the April investigation into Jeni's plant after a Freedom of Information request from The Associated Press. The investigation took place in response to the discovery of listeria and reviewed the company's efforts to stem contamination in the plant.

The report said Jeni's managers did not have an adequate sampling and testing program and were not sufficiently sanitizing some surfaces, including the floors. The report said residue was found on some equipment.

Jeni's regulatory manager and director of operations—the employees responsible for assuring compliance with government food safety guidelines—showed a "lack of competency" by failing to comply with some of those guidelines, according to the report.

Once in a plant, listeria can be very difficult to get rid of. It is found in soil and water and can be tracked into a facility by employees or carried by animals.

Jeni's CEO John Lowe said in a statement on the company's website

Thursday that "we had fixed every issue identified in the report" by May 11.

"We dove in and made darn sure we fixed all of their concerns, and we brought in outside experts to help us find other areas of improvement to create a world class, safe environment for making our ice creams," Lowe said.

The company said earlier this month that it had traced the source of the listeria to a pint-filling machine in the plant.

Lowe said then that Jeni's never will be sure how the bacteria got into the machine, which filled a portion of the pints for retail sales, but he said they were planning to spend about \$200,000 on changes to prevent a recurrence.

Jeni's has said its ice cream will start to return to store shelves "later this summer."

The FDA also released results of a 2008 inspection of Jeni's in response to the AP's Freedom of Information request. That report showed evidence of rodents and insects and inadequate personal cleanliness of employees.

The 2015 investigation didn't find any of those problems. Lowe said the 2008 inspection was of a former production kitchen and the FDA has inspected the new facility twice since with no major food safety concerns, until the 2015 report.

The FDA also released results of 2009 and 2012 inspections of Blue Bell's plants in Texas and Oklahoma. Those inspections showed some early evidence of problems at those facilities, including condensation dripping into containers before they were filled with ice cream and

residue on some food receptacles.

According to results released earlier this month from an FDA investigation, Blue Bell knew there was listeria in the Oklahoma plant from private testing as far back as two years ago.

The FDA said Blue Bell had not notified the government about the listeria findings. Companies are only required to report to the FDA if they find a "reasonable probability" that a food could make people sick.

Blue Bell spokesman Joe Robertson said the company is in the midst of a review of all of its cleaning and procedures "to help give regulatory agencies and the public confidence that when our products return to market, they will be safe."

Listeria generally only affects the elderly, people with compromised immune systems, and pregnant women and their newborn infants. It can cause fever, muscle aches and gastrointestinal symptoms and can be fatal. It also can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, premature labor, and serious illness or death in newborn babies.

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