

US companies warned of possible prosecution for outbreaks

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In this April 10, 2015 file photo, Blue Bell ice cream rests on a grocery store shelf in Lawrence, Kansas. In the wake of a deadly listeria outbreak in ice cream, the Justice Department is warning food companies that they could face criminal and civil penalties if they poison their customers. (AP Photo/Orlin Wagner, File)

Following a deadly listeria outbreak in ice cream in the U.S. earlier this year, justice officials are warning food companies that they could face criminal and civil penalties if they inadvertently poison their customers.

"We have made a priority holding individuals and companies responsible when they fail to live up to their obligations that they have to protect the safety of the food that all of us eat," Associate Attorney General Stuart Delery said in an interview with The Associated Press.

After years of relative inactivity, the administration has stepped up criminal enforcement on safety cases. In the most high-profile case, a court last year found an executive for the Peanut Corporation of America guilty of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, wire fraud and other crimes after his company shipped out salmonella-tainted peanuts that sickened more than 700 and killed nine in 2008 and 2009.

Delery, the No. 3 official at the Justice Department, wouldn't say whether the government plans to pursue charges against Texas-based Blue Bell Creameries, which recalled all its products and shut down production earlier this year after listeria in the company's [ice cream](#) was linked to illnesses and three deaths. An investigation by the Food and Drug Administration, the main U.S. [public health agency](#), found that Blue Bell knew that it had listeria in one of its plants for almost two years before the recall.

Bill Marler, a food safety lawyer who has represented victims in many of such [food safety](#) cases, says the authorities' recent activity is especially notable because in many of the cases, company executives didn't know they were shipping out tainted food, but they were hit with criminal charges anyway.

The food industry says it is on board with regulation and enforcement.



In this Jan. 29, 2009 file photo, an Early County, Ga. Sheriff's car sits parked in front of the the Peanut Corporation of America processing plant in Blakely, Ga. In the wake of a deadly listeria outbreak in ice cream, the Justice Department is warning food companies that they could face criminal and civil penalties if they poison their customers. (AP Photo/Ric Feld, File)

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