



Leaky roof one suspect in salmonella outbreak

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There were rodents, roaches and generally nasty conditions that nobody properly addressed at Peanut Corp. of America's plant in southwest Georgia.

But one culprit behind the largest food-borne illness outbreak in recent history may have been above the plant, not inside it, food-safety experts say.

Peanut Corp. spent \$60,000 on roof repairs in August 2008, according to testimony at a recent bankruptcy hearing.

"I suspect it was so bad that it was raining in there," said attorney Ron Simon. "They had to fix it."

Company officials and their attorneys did not respond to requests for comment. A person who answered the phone at Stewart Parnell's residence said Parnell, the president of Peanut Corp., was traveling and not available.

Simon questioned the company bookkeeper, Grey Adams, about the roof at a bankruptcy hearing in Virginia earlier this month.

Adams is the daughter of Parnell.

Simon represents several salmonella victims — including one in Georgia — who were sickened by products traced to Peanut Corp.

The leaky roof is suspect because there's one thing needed most for salmonella to grow, spread and thrive: water.

Some theorize that when it rained, water could have entered the plant and multiplied any existing salmonella or even introduced the salmonella into the plant.

"That is a likely culprit for the problem," said Michael Hansen, a senior scientist at the watchdog group Consumers Union.

Rainwater, with salmonella-laced bird droppings from the roof, could have fallen on peanut products, he said.

Bird and rodent droppings are common sources of salmonella.



Rainwater containing salmonella also could have landed on machinery.

That machinery could have contaminated many peanut products down the line, he said, especially because both federal and state inspections cited problems with cleaning at the plant.

The roof did leak profusely, said Anne Bristow, a former plant sanitation worker. She said workers moved products around to keep water from dousing them overnight.

"I don't mean a leak here and a leak there," she said. "I mean it rained in there."

Michael Doyle, director of the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety, said water can create a dangerous situation.

"Allowing water to get into a dry [processing] environment would be like putting gas on a fire," Doyle said.

Roof problems were noted at the plant in Blakely as long ago as February 2007, when a state inspection report recorded the existence of a leak in the roof over a cooler.

The salmonella outbreak traced to the Blakely plant has sickened more than 600 people and has been linked to nine deaths.

Almost 4,000 products have been recalled.

Water from a leaky roof may have played a role in a previous outbreak of food-borne illness at a ConAgra peanut butter plant in Sylvester.

That salmonella outbreak sickened more than 400 people nationwide in 2006-2007 and was most likely caused by either a faulty sprinkler system or roof leak that developed after an August 2006 rainstorm, or both, ConAgra officials said. The additional moisture activated "dormant levels of salmonella," the company said.

"Two years ago, everybody knew better than to have a leaky roof," but that didn't change anything at Peanut Corp., said Simon, the attorney.

Officials are still investigating how the salmonella got into the Peanut Corp. plant and contaminated the products. The plant is considered the primary source of the current salmonella outbreak.

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Even after the repairs had been made to the roof, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in January documented water stains and streaks, as well as a gap in the roof about 2 feet long and a half-inch wide.

Georgia's assistant agriculture commissioner for consumer protection on Tuesday acknowledged that rainwater leaks could pose serious problems.

"Anytime you've got rain from a flat surface that collects contaminants — anytime that falls on food product — you've got risk," said Oscar Garrison, the assistant commissioner.

Federal officials are also eyeing other potential sources — the peanut shellers who operate away from the Peanut Corp. plant, and even the farms that produced the peanuts.

"It's never just one thing," said longtime food-borne illness attorney Bill Marler, who represents about 85 plaintiffs who were sickened or killed by products linked to Peanut Corp.

"What normally happens," he said, "is that a whole bunch of small things come together to cause an event that poisons people."