Collaboration between state and federal partners is crucial in a foodborne outbreak investigation. It is important to establish trust among the many partners involved so data can be shared and acted upon in a timely manner. For the past five years, states have actively engaged with the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) through cooperative agreements aimed to strengthen laboratory capability and data quality. Having verifiable evidence that a laboratory produces reliable data allows FDA to take action quickly when an outbreak occurs.

These cooperative agreements have strengthened the collaboration between states and FDA, which proved to be valuable during a recent foodborne illness outbreak. In early March 2017, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced it was investigating a multi-state outbreak of Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 (O157 STEC) infections. Epidemiologic evidence pointed to I.M. Healthy’s SoyNut Butter as the likely source of the outbreak, as a majority of the case patients reported eating the product.

State public health laboratories provided crucial assistance in this investigation by testing SoyNut Butter products for pathogenic *E. coli*. California Department of Public Health collected unopened product samples of SoyNut Butter from various retail outlets which tested positive for the outbreak strain of O157 STEC. Oregon Public Health Division and Washington Department of Health also collected consumer samples from the homes of case patients that tested positive for the outbreak strain. PFGE patterns from six consumer and two retail food samples matched the outbreak patterns from the human illness cases.

FDA’s inspection of the manufacturing facility that produced the SoyNut Butter revealed unsanitary conditions. These findings were bolstered by testing performed by the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene on unopened jars of SoyNut Butter with three different “Best By” dates. Jars from all three dates tested positive for fecal coliform bacteria, which is indicative of fecal contamination.

Supported by data from these state public health laboratories, FDA ordered the manufacturer to shut down operations on March 27, 2017. CDC’s final report on March 30, 2017 stated that 29 people from 12 states were infected with the outbreak strains of O157 STEC. Twelve cases were hospitalized, and nine people developed hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). The vast majority (83%) of people showing illness during this outbreak were less than 18 years old.

An integrated food safety system must be built upon the concept of data sharing and reliance on the accuracy and integrity of laboratory data. The partnerships that have flourished through the cooperative agreements between FDA and state food testing laboratories allow for mutual reliance—the recognition of another’s work as correct and actionable. In this case, FDA’s acceptance of state data helped verify the outbreak source and remove an implicated product from retail—ultimately protecting public health.

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