Virginia’s Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services (DCLS) is one of 30 state laboratories in the final year of a five-year Cooperative Agreement with the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) aimed at achieving ISO/IEC 17025:2005 accreditation to advance a nationally integrated food safety system. Accreditation adds confidence and credibility to laboratory data, and supports the traceability and accountability of laboratory results that are submitted to a food regulatory agency for surveillance, compliance, enforcement and foodborne illness outbreak actions.

As part of the cooperative agreement, states are required to work with regulators to develop sampling agreements that target high-risk, manufactured food items. As well as preventing potential foodborne outbreaks, these agreements foster proactive communication and planning between the regulatory program and the laboratory. DCLS has a long history of performing food safety testing in cooperation with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), and together they developed a sampling plan to target specific commodities to test throughout the year for foodborne diseases. It specifies collection of a different product on a monthly basis. DCLS tests for specific pathogens based on their proposed scope of accreditation, which includes E.coli O157, Salmonella and Listeria monocytogenes.

In March 2015, VDACS collected soy and mung bean sprouts from various manufacturers to test for L. monocytogenes. A soybean sprout sample from one manufacturer tested positive for the pathogen, a recall was issued on March 8 and the firm closed for remediation. Once the manufacturer was reinstated and resumed production, VDACS pulled their products again to assess ongoing risk. DCLS isolated L. monocytogenes from the samples, which led to a second recall issued on June 22 and forced the firm to close again for remediation. When targeted sampling produced an additional L. monocytogenes positive sample resulting in a third and final recall on August 3, the manufacturer decided to cease production and closed permanently in November 2015.

During this targeted sampling, DCLS tested more than 200 samples in an eight-month period in addition to their regular caseload. The positive findings demonstrate the value of the agreements and their potential impact on public health. Because of the directed sampling assignments, DCLS has also found L. monocytogenes in soft cheese and smoked salmon products and Salmonella in cilantro. The ability of DCLS to identify these harmful products and remove them from the US food supply is integral to protecting public health and reducing foodborne illnesses.

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