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## LESSON LEARNED

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### Food Recall Operations: Activating Joint Information Centers

#### SUMMARY

Food safety agencies should consider activating a joint information center (JIC) whenever they activate their emergency operations center (EOC) for a food recall operation. This will ensure that the incident managers have immediate access to public information officers (PIO).

#### DESCRIPTION

On July 18, 2007, Castleberry's Food Company launched a voluntary recall of several food products to investigate possible contamination with *clostridium botulinum*, a bacterium that can cause botulism. Two days later, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS) began to monitor the situation, activated its Joint Food Emergency Operations Command Center (JFEOCC), and formed an incident management team. NCDA&CS instituted the use of the incident command system to manage the incident on July 25, 2007, and began developing daily incident action plans. NCDA&CS dispatched state health officials to conduct recall effectiveness checks of 250 locations that had recently received contaminated products. State officials found that 38% of stores still had contaminated products in circulation. Approximately 5,500 products were embargoed or retained and removed from retail shelves.

Botulism is a nerve toxin produced by the *clostridium botulinum* bacteria that can cause paralysis or death.

The NCDA&CS recall command staff members became alarmed at the results of the recall effectiveness checks. The command staff activated additional personnel to increase the effectiveness of the recall effort. The command staff also established three trigger points that would indicate a need to expand the recall to include local food distributors: the discovery of swollen cans in North Carolina, human illness related to the recalled product in other states, or any additional recall actions taken by the US Food and Drug Administration, the US Department of Agriculture, or Castleberry's Food. On July 31, Castleberry's expanded the recall to include 48 products from the manufacturing facility in question.

NCDA&CS dispatched state regulatory officials to conduct inspections targeting warehouses, small convenience stores, independent grocery stores, and other locations. NCDA&CS, working with the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR), requested and received the assistance of environmental health specialists from all county health departments and health districts to aid recall verification efforts. NCDENR and local health department personnel visited summer camps, child care centers, pre-schools, and other locations.

The seriousness of the contamination demanded the distribution of timely information about the recall to the public. PIOs from federal, state, and local agencies worked from their

offices and coordinated with NCDA&CS via email. The rapid exchange of information with multiple PIOs made it difficult to provide timely information to the public. This proved particularly challenging when Castleberry's Food expanded the number recalled products, which required additional notifications to the public by NCDA&CS. Further, Castleberry's and federal regulatory agencies had different products on their recall lists, which presented additional challenges for NCDA&CS.

The after-action report notes that NCDA&CS should consider activating a JIC to run parallel to the JFEOCC whenever it is activated. This can be accomplished by designating a space for a JIC within the JFEOCC. It will ensure that the incident management team has immediate access to PIOs during food recall operations. Greater coordination of federal and private sector recall lists would facilitate state public information efforts. One way to achieve this would be to establish a federal-private sector JIC during a food recall incident.

Food safety agencies should consider activating a JIC whenever they activate their EOC for a food recall operation. This will ensure that the incident managers have immediate access to PIOs.

### **CITATIONS**

Campbell, Wendy. Food Defense Coordinator, North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 20 Jul 2009.

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[http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/dfbmd/disease\\_listing/botulism\\_gi.html](http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/dfbmd/disease_listing/botulism_gi.html)

North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. *Castleberry Foods Recall After Action Report*. 10 Jan 2008.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=34969>

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