

Recalls aid local food safety efforts

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A recall of more than 500 million eggs that spread to include Michigan on Wednesday has fortified local efforts to make Battle Creek a global hub for food safety.

Nearly 2,000 people nationwide reported feeling sick after eating shelled eggs between May and July, leading three companies responsible for the salmonella-tainted eggs to issue voluntary recalls in mid-August.

Because it can take two to three weeks for salmonella illnesses to develop, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention expect the number to continue climbing.

Eggs are not the only food to be recalled on a large scale recently. About 380,000 pounds of deli meat products sold in Walmart stores were recalled this week by Zemco Industries of Buffalo, N.Y., because they could contain listeria, a sometimes fatal organism.

Kellogg Co., based in Battle Creek, recalled 28 million boxes of cereal in June after a few dozen consumers reported a strange odor from the packaging caused by 2-methylnaphthalene. Food safety became the focus of economic development in downtown Battle Creek after it became clear that major food recalls like this would continue to rise if the inspection system did not change, said Karl Dehn, president and chief executive officer of Battle Creek Unlimited, the city's economic developer.

Local economic developers envisioned a new approach to food safety that did a better job educating food inspectors, accelerating food safety technology and coordinating emergency responses to recalls. Battle Creek Unlimited helped create the Global Food Protection Institute in 2009.

The GFPI's first goal was to develop a training institute for food inspectors that would be paid for by the [federal government](#) so that no student would be denied because of an inability to pay.

In its first year, International Food Protection

Training Institute has taught about 850 people from 47 states how to catch food problems quickly and to better communicate with outside agencies to issue timely recalls.

"We're very pleased with the success and momentum they have gained in the year, so as a community we are off to a good start," Dehn said. "We want to continue to grow the institute and grow the economic development opportunities that it brings us."

Jerry Wojtala, IFPTI [executive director](#), declined to talk specifically about the recent egg recall, but said some food recalls could have been prevented if food inspectors had received better training throughout their careers.

"Some of the recalls were from typical things that should have been caught in inspections," he said.

But sometimes the problem is in the way food inspections are handled now.

The Food and Drug Administration, for example, can't force a company to issue a food recall or ensure steps are taken prevent a recall. It also has no way to recoup the cost of its efforts to inspect a suspected recall and issue public notices.

For several years, regulators have been pushing for food safety reform, and they might see the fruits of their labor this fall when members of the U.S. Senate are expected to pass the Food Safety Modernization

Act with bipartisan support.

"It really is sweeping legislation," Wojtala said. "We haven't see this much change since the 1930s."

The bill would give the Food and Drug Administration more authority to enforce food safety measures, he said.

Companies would be required to submit hazard plans to be approved by the FDA. Food inspectors would have access to those plans and the power to ensure they are being followed.

Another portion of the bill would require the FDA to develop a plan for tracing foods back to their original source, especially [fruits and vegetables](#) which often get lost in the repackaging shuffle, Wojtala said. Some companies have already started to do that by placing bar codes on their products.

Wojtala also said the bill would have the FDA develop performance standards for food producers.

Farms would have rules to follow regarding irrigation, manure, worker hygiene and other areas suspect to contamination.

"That has been all voluntary up until this point," Wojtala said.

Foreign companies would also be required to show proof that the safety of their products has been verified by a third-party.

Perhaps most important, the FDA would have the authority to issue mandatory recalls when a company is unwilling to do it voluntarily and the power to recoup its costs from the company.

"Those are areas that if we can help government regulators and food safety officers do their jobs quicker and identify problems earlier, it will minimize the impact when a recall does occur," Wojtala said.

Elizabeth Willis can be reached at 966-0684 or ewillis@gannett.com.