

Overhaul of food safety monitoring is crucial

by the San Diego Union-Tribune

The mercenary and callous nature of Stewart Parnell, the owner of Peanut Corp. of America, became clear last week. Even as he invoked the Fifth Amendment and declined to answer questions from the congressional committee that subpoenaed him, documents released by the committee point to Parnell's perfidy.

Eight deaths and thousands of illnesses have been linked to a salmonella outbreak traced to the company's Georgia plant.

The House panel released e-mails showing that Parnell ordered salmonella-tainted products to be shipped to customers. One e-mail obtained by investigators shows him complaining that the contamination discoveries were "costing us huge \$\$\$\$\$." In another e-mail, he responded to an employee who notified him of a salmonella find. "I go thru this about once a week," he wrote in June 2008. "I will hold my breath ... again."

A federal criminal investigation is under way, and we trust Parnell and his top managers will receive justice.

But the bigger issue is the nation's badly flawed food safety system. State and federal inspectors do not require the peanut industry to inform the public, or the government, when private tests reveal salmonella in processing plants, as was the case 12 times in the Georgia plant since 2007. Monitoring of the plant was done by state inspectors under contract to the Food and Drug Administration. But Georgia inspectors have said that large caseloads and declining budgets limited their effectiveness.

Even as it deals with other pressing issues, the Obama administration must follow through on the campaign promise to thoroughly overhaul oversight of the country's food chain. The health of the nation literally depends on it.

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