



News Release

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DCLS, VDACS COLLABORATION LEADS TO NATIONAL RECALL OF CHEESE, DAIRY PRODUCTS LINKED TO ILLNESS, DEATH ~ *Listeria monocytogenes* found during routine testing, product pulled from shelves ~

Richmond, VA – The work of two Virginia agencies has led to the discovery of *Listeria monocytogenes* in cheese and dairy products and the launch of a national food recall, the agencies announced Wednesday.

The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) and the Department of General Services' Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services (DCLS) identified *Listeria contamination* in cheese produced by Oasis Brands Inc. of Florida. The company issued a voluntary recall of its quesito casero on August 4, 2014 before the recall was expanded in October to include Cuajada en Hoja (fresh curd) and various cheese and dairy products sold under the Lacteos Santa Martha brand.

The bacteria discovered in samples collected by VDACS and tested by DCLS was found to be highly related to sequences of *Listeria* strains that sickened individuals in New York, Texas and Tennessee. One death was reported in Tennessee. One of the illnesses was related to a pregnancy and was diagnosed in a newborn, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“Although this is routine work for VDACS and DCLS, the initial identification of *Listeria monocytogenes* and subsequent reporting launched a national food recall that helped to save additional lives and minimize the impact of this contaminated product,” said Ryan Davis, Program Manager, Office of Food Safety and Security at VDACS.

VDACS collected samples from a retail store in Galax, Va., as part of a directed sampling effort by its Rapid Response Team to test Hispanic-style soft cheeses. On July 28, 2014, DCLS testing identified *Listeria monocytogenes* in a sample of quesito casero, a type of unaged soft cheese produced by Oasis.

According to an outbreak investigation by the CDC, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) began inspections at an Oasis processing facility in Miami on August 1, 2014. Samples collected at the facility also yielded *Listeria monocytogenes*.

To further characterize the *Listeria* after its presence was discovered, DCLS and FDA performed pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) and whole genome sequencing (WGS) on the samples to produce a DNA fingerprint of the bacteria that was present. DCLS is one of only a few state laboratories in the nation to be approved by FDA to perform whole genome testing.

Once the bacteria was identified, VDACS reported the findings to Florida's Integrated Rapid Response Team and DCLS entered the data into PulseNet, the national network of state and local public health laboratories, CDC and federal food regulatory laboratories that performs molecular surveillance of foodborne infections.

Once entered into the PulseNet database, the *Listeria* strains found in the Virginia and Miami samples were discovered to be indistinguishable from those found in the three people who became ill from June through September. Those findings led FDA to announce additional recalls.

The FDA announced the following Oasis recalls:

- August 4, 2014 _ voluntary recall of quesito casero cheese that was sold in retail stores in North Carolina and Virginia (expiration date September 27, 2014)
- October 6, 2014 _ Cuajada en Hoja fresh curd that was sold in South Florida (best by dates of October 1 and October 18, 2014)
- October 16, 2014 _ various lots of Lacteos Santa Martha products distributed in Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina from April 1 through October 14 (best by dates of July 1 through December 31, 2014)

“This recall shows what can happen when state and federal agencies work together to protect our citizens,” said Richard F. Sliwoski, P.E., Director of the Department of General Services. “Our collaboration with VDACS allows us to catch these sort of contaminations early, and the sophisticated monitoring of foodborne illnesses done in concert with the federal government connects the dots and prompts recalls to limit any harm.”

The collaboration between VDACS and DCLS has led to several other national food alerts and/or recalls, including the Salmonella and aflatoxin contaminations in foods including peanut butter, cilantro, peppers, tomatoes and alfalfa sprouts. In Fiscal Year 2014, DCLS tested more than 1,400 food samples collected by VDACS and 12 were positive for

foodborne pathogens or toxins. Since July 1, 2014, the lab has tested 910 samples, and three were positive for pathogens.

According to the CDC, about 1,600 people in the US get sick from *Listeria* each year. At least 90 percent of those who get *Listeria* infections are pregnant women and their newborns, people 65 or older or those with weakened immune systems.

CDC, the FDA and the states involved continue to work closely on the investigation.

The VDACS Food Safety and Security Program is responsible for enforcing Virginia food laws and ensuring a safe, wholesome and properly labeled food supply in the Commonwealth. Food safety activities are conducted through a variety of methods, including unannounced sanitary inspections of facilities, sampling of food products and investigation of consumer complaints. More information is available at <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/fdsafety/index.shtml>.

DCLS, Virginia's public health and environmental laboratory, performs more than 7 million tests annually to identify genetic and metabolic disorders in newborn children and to detect infectious agents and toxic chemicals in humans, animals, the environment, the food we eat and the water we drink. Each year, DCLS trains more than 5,000 scientists, certifies nearly 100 laboratories, receives over 1 million samples, and prepares and distributes more than 300,000 test collection kits across the Commonwealth. More information is available at <http://www.dgs.virginia.gov>.

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