FEDS Seize Cheese from Montesano Creamery Over Listeria Concerns

Local News

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Montesano, WA - The U.S. Marshal’s Service seized all cheese products at Estrella Family Creamery (Estrella) in Montesano, Washington, Thursday, October 21, 2010, after repeated tests by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Washington State Department of Agriculture (WADA) over the last several months showed the persistent presence of a pathogen, *Listeria monocytogenes*, in Estrella’s cheese products and facilities. The pathogen can cause the illness listeriosis which can be life threatening for the aged, infirm, very young or immune compromised individuals. The pathogen can be especially dangerous for pregnant women. U.S. District Court Judge Benjamin Settle authorized the seizure. According to the FDA affidavit filed in U.S. District Court in Tacoma, the WADA collected samples of cheese and cheese ingredients from production areas at the farm on February 1st, 9th, and March 1, 2010. Testing revealed the presence of *Listeria monocytogenes* in the cheese, in the salt brine used in processing the cheese, and in production and storage areas throughout the farm. Estrella recalled a variety of cheeses in February and March 2010 following the test results.

In August, the FDA inspected the farm, collecting a new set of samples. The samples revealed the presence of *Listeria monocytogenes* in the production space and aging rooms. Further, Estrella’s owners revealed that their own tests between March and May 2010, showed the presence of *Listeria monocytogenes* in certain cheese products. On August 16, 2010, an FDA sample of “Caldwell Crik Chevrette,” that was ready to be shipped to customers, tested positive for *Listeria monocytogenes*. FDA testing revealed the *Listeria monocytogenes* pathogen found in August was indistinguishable from the pathogen found in March, indicating Estrella had not remedied the insanitary conditions found by the WADA in February and March 2010. On September 3, 2010, the FDA asked Estrella to recall all cheese products. The company refused. The FDA issued a warning to consumers regarding the potential presence of *Listeria monocytogenes* in Estrella cheese on September 4, 2010. Under the warrant signed last week, Estrella’s cheese products were seized to prevent the sale and dissemination of adulterated and potentially contaminated food. The seizure is a civil action undertaken by the FDA. Assistant United States Attorneys David East and Kerry Keefe are handling the matter for the U.S. Attorney’s Office.