

**Georgia Food Safety and Defense Task Force
Progress Report 2008
By Nelle Couret and Van Harris**

ATLANTA: The Georgia Food Safety and Defense Task Force group meets quarterly to discuss current issues that require multi-agency response. The meetings are conducted to focus on food safety. Topics include: foodborne illnesses and outbreaks, data sharing between regulatory agencies, and better communication with the public, media, and consumers. Team members work cooperatively to promote uniform standards, program assessment and evaluation, laboratory operations coordination, and food safety education, training, and certification. In 2008, the meetings were held on January 9th, May 21st, and October 1st.

Communication

The Public Communications Panel, representing FDA, GDA, DHR, and Publix, was convened to discuss strategies for communicating with the media and the public. Specifically regarding multistate outbreaks, recall alerts, and assistance for small independent retailers, the need for rapid response time to requests for information was stressed. The language level (equivalent to 6th grade reading) and “message mapping” were also discussed. In addition to timely communication during outbreaks and recalls, education efforts and tools were presented by task force members and guest speakers regarding ill food workers, hand washing, and dairy pasteurization. Laurie Farmer presented the concept of FIRST – Follow, Inspect, Recognize, Secure, and Tell. This strategy is to be implemented at the employee level, notifying employees that they play an integral part in food safety defense.

National Meetings

Conference for Food Protection

Janice Buchanon presented issues covered during the biennial CFP meeting. CFP membership consists of approximately 500 members from industry, academia, regulatory inspectors, and the public. One issue mentioned specifically was that of leafy greens and temperature control. Leafy greens must be maintained at temperature control for safety once cut. To follow up on this issue, the Environmental Health Specialist Network conducted a study of restaurant handling and storage practices for leafy greens. The study has concluded the data collection phase and will enter data analysis in 2009.

FDA 50 State Meeting: Gateway to Food Protection

On August 12-14, 2008, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration hosted a three-day national meeting in St. Louis, Mo., entitled the “Gateway to Food Protection.” The FDA held the meeting to build upon the integrated approach of prevention, intervention and response described in FDA’s recently released Food Protection Plan. The focus of the meeting was to examine how to utilize a National food safety system to address a global food supply.

Representatives from 50 states as well as from local and tribal communities and territories were invited to attend the event. The FDA believes that the FPP will only be successful with the input and assistance from our state, local, tribal and territorial partners. The national meeting focused on four topic areas: outbreaks, recalls, risk-based inspections and roles and responsibilities. Teams of federal, state and local officials were tasked with identifying and developing a series of action items and recommendations to better coordinate and align FDA's respective programs along the lines noted in the FPP, which are enhancing efficiency and effectiveness; improving communication; increase the sharing of data and information at all levels of government, and improve the services the agency provide to its citizens. The representatives from Georgia were Tonya Gray (DHR - Environmental Health) and Van Harris (GDA – Consumer Protection Division).

Georgia Foodborne Outbreaks

Several restaurant associated outbreaks occurred in Georgia in 2008. Representatives from DHR Epidemiology Office provided updates regarding outbreaks during each quarterly meeting. Cherie Drenzek and Melissa Tobin D'Angelo updated the group that several institutional outbreaks of Shigella and Norovirus have occurred as well, including one outbreak in a school. Georgia also participated in the investigation of a multi-state Salmonella outbreak investigation. Ingrid Zambrana of FDA presented the trace back investigation for the food vehicle for this outbreak. During the trace back beginning with raw tomatoes, and ultimately leading to consumption of raw peppers. Among the lessons learned, cultural and language barriers were discussed, as the trace back process included an FDA response team to travel to Mexico. In addition, barriers to communication included coordinating the sharing of information with the US response from abroad.

Other Presentation Topics and Discussion Points:

Dr. Anilkumar Mangla from DHR Environmental Health gave a comprehensive presentation on the pathways of lead poisoning and its diagnosis being unrealized. Dr. Mangla is currently studying anemia and its correlation to blood lead.

Dr. Reuben Beverly presented information about antibiotics in seafood. Some antibiotics cannot be used in the United States due to concerns regarding antibiotic resistance emerging in pathogens. Sanitarians from the Consumer Protection Division collect samples to detect antibiotics, particularly in imports from Vietnam and China.

Van Harris (GDA Consumer Protection Division) and Nelle Couret (DHR Environmental Health) presented an explanation of the procedures in Georgia regarding Boil Water Notifications. Communication between Georgia EPD, GDA, and DHR is critical during BWN's to ensure that permitted facilities maintain proper operating procedures and have a potable water source. Emergency SOPs and alternate water sources were discussed as potential strategies for permitted facilities to deal with temporary events. Dana Cole (DHR Epidemiology) provided an update of the Water Advisory Group. WAG consists of representatives from various agencies involved in water protection. Important points included a contact list and specific information about dialysis patients, a very high risk group.

Grants and Cooperative Agreements

FDA Grants

FDA presented the grant opportunities and awards to States by FDA in 2008. The four grants presented are to be seen as a pilot, perhaps to be expanded in 2009. The suggestion was made that Georgia should communicate with grant awarded States to examine their infrastructure. Successful submissions demonstrated utilization of the ICS framework for emergency management.

USDA/FSIS Emergency Management Cooperative Agreement with UGA

The long term goal of this agreement is to apply the lessons of Georgia on a regional basis. In the next 12 months, the plan is to execute two food emergency exercises with all of the key players involved. The perspective is from all foods, and no specific product or commodity was chosen in advance – mirroring a true food emergency, where the commodity is not known in advance. The program will examine typical high risk products such as Ready-To-Eat foods. An email group was established to keep interested stake holders in contact.