TuSalud

Silence on E. Coli Outbreak Highlights How Trump Team's Changes Undermine Food Safety

Each year, about 48 million people in the U.S. get sick with foodborne illnesses, 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die.

June 12, 2025 By Stephanie Armour and KFF Health News

Colton George felt sick. The 9-year-old Indiana boy told his parents his stomach hurt. He kept running to the bathroom and felt too ill to finish a basketball game.

Days later, he lay in a hospital bed, fighting for his life. He had eaten tainted salad, according to a lawsuit against the lettuce grower filed by his parents on April 17 in federal court for the Southern District of Indiana.

The E. coli bacteria that ravaged Colton's kidneys was a genetic match to the strain that killed one person and sickened nearly 90 people in 15 states last fall. Federal health agencies investigated the cases and linked them to a farm that grew romaine lettuce.

But most people have never heard about this outbreak, which a February 11 internal FDA memo linked to a single lettuce processor and ranch as the source of the contamination. In what many experts said was a break with common practice, officials never issued public communications after the investigation or identified the grower who produced the lettuce.

From failing to publicize a major outbreak to scaling back safety alert specialists and rules, the Trump administration's anti-regulatory and cost-cutting push risks unraveling a critical system that helps ensure the safety of the U.S. food supply, according to consumer advocates, researchers and former employees at the FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The investigation into the illnesses began near the end of the Biden administration but work on the lettuce outbreak wasn't completed until February 11. At that time, the decision was made by the Trump administration not to release the names of the grower and processor because the FDA said no product remained on the market.

The administration also has withdrawn a proposed regulation to reduce the presence of salmonella in raw poultry, according to an April USDA alert. It was projected to save more than $13 million

annually by preventing more than 3,000 illnesses, according to the proposal.

Officials from the Department of Health and Human Services have said that food safety is a priority, and FDA Commissioner Marty Makary said in an April 29 interview with the newsletter Inside Medicine that the recent job cuts would not affect agency operations.

“The FDA had 9,500 employees in 2007. Last year it was nearly 19,000. Has the 100% increase in employees increased approval times, innovation, AI, food safety, or agency morale?” Makary asked. “No, it hasn’t. In fact, it’s increased regulatory creep.”

The FDA referred questions to HHS, which declined to comment or make Makary available for an interview. In a statement, the agency said “protecting public health and insuring food safety remain top priorities for HHS. FDA inspectors were not impacted [by job cuts] and this critical work will continue.”

Public health advocates warn companies and growers will face less regulatory oversight and fewer consequences for selling tainted food products as a result of recent FDA actions.

The administration is disbanding a Justice Department unit that pursues civil and criminal actions against companies that sell contaminated food and is reassigning its attorneys. Some work will be assumed by other divisions, according to a publicly posted memo from the head of the department’s criminal division and a white paper by the law firm Gibson Dunn.

The Justice Department did not respond to an email requesting comment.

“They need the DOJ to enforce the law,” said Sarah Sorscher, director of regulatory affairs at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nonprofit consumer advocacy group. “For an executive investing in food safety, the knowledge they could go to jail if they don’t is a really strong motivator.”

Federal regulators also want states to conduct more inspections, according to two former FDA officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation. But some Democratic lawmakers say states lack the resources to take over most food safety inspections.

“Handing that duty to state and local agencies is really troubling,” said Rep. Shontel M. Brown (D-Ohio). “They don’t have the resources, and it creates a potentially unsafe situation that puts families in Ohio and America at risk.”

The High Cost of Foodborne Illnesses

Foodborne illnesses exact a major economic toll in the United States, according to federal data, and cost thousands of lives each year. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates the deaths, chronic illness, medical treatment, and lost productivity from food-related illnesses amounted to $75 billion in 2023.

Each year, about 48 million people in the U.S. get sick with foodborne illnesses, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In its first few months, the administration has suspended a program known as the Food Emergency Response Network Proficiency Testing that ensures food-testing labs accurately identify pathogens that can sicken or kill, according to a former FDA official.

In March, the agency said it would delay from January 2026 to July 2028 compliance with a Biden-era rule that aims to speed up the identification and removal of potentially contaminated food from the market.

However, the FDA is taking aim at foreign food manufacturing, saying in a May 6 notice that it would expand unannounced inspections overseas. “This expanded approach marks a new era in FDA enforcement — stronger, smarter, and unapologetically in support of the public health and safety of Americans,” the notice said.

Some former FDA and USDA officials said that goal isn’t realistic, because U.S. inspectors often need to obtain travel visas that can wind up alerting companies to their arrival.

“It’s really, really difficult to do surprise inspections,” said Brian Ronholm, director of food policy for Consumer Reports and a former USDA deputy undersecretary for food safety. “The visa process can alert the local authority.”

HHS declined to address Ronholm’s concerns.

The FDA hasn’t met the mandated targets for inspecting food facilities in the U.S. since fiscal year 2018, and the agency has consistently fallen short of meeting its annual targets for foreign inspections, according to a January report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Foodborne illness can turn serious. Salmonella bacteria in cucumbers sickened dozens of people in April and May and left at least nine people hospitalized, according to the FDA. A 2008-09 salmonella outbreak involving peanut butter killed nine, resulting in criminal charges against company executives. And E. coli in cookie dough sickened more than 70 people in 2009, including a Nevada mother who died of complications from eating the raw dough.

‘Life or Death for Our Son’

E. coli, commonly found in feces, can be especially dangerous to children like Colton, the boy from Avon, Indiana, who ate contaminated lettuce. The bacteria can damage blood vessels and cause clots that destroy the kidneys, leading to strokes and comas. Consumers sickened by E. coli can pass it along to others, and, in some cases, the bacteria end up killing victims who never consumed the contaminated food.

By the time Colton’s mother brought him to the emergency room that November day, the bacteria were releasing toxins and damaging his blood cells and kidneys, according to his father, Chris

George.

Colton was sent to Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis. Chris said doctors told him and his wife, Amber George, that their son was in kidney failure and the next 24 to 72 hours would determine whether he would survive, the father recalled.

“They said it was life or death for our son, and I was like, wait, he was just playing basketball,” said Chris, a firefighter. “I told them, ‘You do what you need to do to save my son.’”

Usually, the FDA alerts the public and identifies growers and food manufacturers when there are outbreaks like the one that sickened Colton. The FDA said in its February internal summary that the grower wasn’t named because no product remained on the market.

But Bill Marler, a Seattle lawyer who specializes in food-safety litigation and represents the George family, said the information is still important because it can prevent more cases, pressure growers to improve sanitation, and identify repeat offenders.

It also gives victims an explanation for their illnesses and helps them determine whom they might take legal action against, he said.

“Normally we would see the information on their websites,” Marler said, adding that the agency’s investigatory findings on the outbreak were “all redacted” and he obtained them through a Freedom of Information Act request.

The FDA, USDA, and CDC play central roles in overseeing food safety, including inspections and investigations. The FDA and CDC have been rocked by job cuts that are part of a reduction of 20,000 staff at HHS, their parent agency. The Agriculture Department has also shrunk its workforce.

Staffing cuts mean delays in publicizing deadly outbreaks, said Susan Mayne, an adjunct professor at Yale School of Public Health who retired from the FDA in 2023.

“Consumers are being notified with delays about important food safety notifications,” she said, referring to a recent outbreak in cucumbers. “People can die if there are pathogens like listeria, which can have a 30% fatality rate.”

Makary has said the cuts wouldn’t touch inspectors, reviewers, or scientists at the agency.

But the FDA laid off scientists in April who worked at food safety labs in Chicago and San Francisco, where they performed specialized analysis for food inspectors, former FDA officials said. The FDA later restored some positions.

“No scientists were fired? That was incorrect,” Mayne said.

Siobhan DeLancey, who worked in the agency’s Office of Foods and Veterinary Medicine for more

than 20 years before she also was laid off in April, said new requirements for reviewing agency announcements became so arduous that it took weeks to get approval for alerts that should have been going out much sooner.

She said some employees who were laid off include communications specialists and web staff who do consumer outreach aimed at preventing illness. The USDA and FDA have been bringing some workers back or are asking some who accepted deferred resignations to take back their decisions.

“It’s all about destruction and not about efficiency,” DeLancey said. “We’re going to see the effects for years. It will cost lives.”

HHS did not respond to an email seeking a response to DeLancey’s comments.

For 13 days, Colton stayed on dialysis at the hospital, initially unable to eat or drink. His mother wet a sponge to moisten his lips and tongue.

He turned 10 in the hospital. Chris George bought paint markers to make signs on the windows of his son’s room.

“I am not happy with the CDC and FDA,” Chris George said. “Victims have a right to know who made them sick. This is my kid. He’s my life.”

Colton was able to leave the hospital almost three weeks after first eating the contaminated lettuce but still has nightmares about the ordeal and is seeing a therapist.

“The whole ‘Make America Healthy Again,’ the focus on taking food color dyes out of cereal?” said Chris George, who objects to the Trump administration’s decision to redact information about the grower in the February report. “How about we take E. coli out of our lettuce, so it doesn’t kill our kids?”

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