

## Senators Grill Pet Industry on Dog Food Recall

**Hearing on the dog food recall calls for greater regulation of the pet food industry.**

*Rose Gordon*

Posted: April 12, 2007, 7 p.m. EST

A Senate Appropriations Subcommittee questioned the amount of government oversight in place to regulate the pet food industry at a hearing on Capitol Hill this afternoon. Led by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), who called for the hearing after the chemical melamine was found in wheat gluten used to make pet food, the senators grilled the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's top veterinarian, Stephen Sundlof, DVM, on his agency's role in the recent dog food recall.

"The FDA's response to this situation has been wholly inadequate – we need to establish standardized inspections, impose penalties on companies who delay reporting health problems and increase communication between the FDA and the state inspectors so that we can catch potential problems more quickly," said Durbin. "These sound like basics steps but the FDA has failed to put them in place."

Asked by Durbin how many pet food manufacturing plants the FDA regularly inspects, Sundlof said it had inspected about 30 percent of them (slightly more than 600 individual plants) one or two times since 2004.

The FDA had issued conflicting reports on the recall, leaving people rightfully confused and angry, said Herb Kohl (D-WI) chairman of the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies.

Durbin agreed, suggesting at one point to Sundlof that the FDA take a moment to organize its website in a "more user-friendly" manner.

"Point well-taken senator," Sundlof responded.

Today the FDA warned that recalled product remained on the shelves of some of the 400 stores it surveyed. Most stores, however, have complied with the recall, Sundlof said.

"We believe the recall has been very effective in preventing further deaths," he said.

Sundlof stopped short, however, of assuring that no additional products would be recalled in the near future.

Ranking committee member Robert Bennett (R-UT) said he believed the FDA reacted swiftly but that would not make up for the loss cat and dog owners were feeling.

The committee also heard from members of the pet industry, including veterinarians Elizabeth Hodgkins and Claudia Kirk and Duane Ekedahl, executive director of the Pet Food Institute and Eric Nelson, president of the American Association of Feed Control Officers.

Most panel members said they believed the pet food industry was already sufficiently regulated but that something had gone wrong in the system.

Just today the Pet Food Institute formed the National Pet Food Commission, a coalition of vets and regulators, to investigate the recall and guard against future problems, Ekedahl said.

We believe we have a system that works, he said.

Citing the Banfield Pet Hospital statistics released earlier this week that showed that less than 1 percent of the animals it saw in the three weeks following the recall died, Ekedahl said, "It does suggest this industry acted very responsibly ... once they learned of the contamination."

Durbin, however, challenged Ekedahl's depiction of the industry as "highly regulated," and called for vigorous inspections and regulations for all of the U.S. food industry, human and pet.

As he has in the past, Durbin called for the creation of a single, independent agency to monitor all federal food safety

responsibilities. With more than a dozen federal agencies and dozens of different laws governing food safety, there is no way to safely and effectively monitor our food supplies, he said.

Durbin also questioned both the FDA and Ekedahl on Menu's apparent three-week gap from the time it first learned of the possibility that its food caused animal illnesses on Feb. 20 to the time it reported the problem to the government March 15. Ekedahl said, "I have no direct knowledge of the timing," whereby Durbin offered to read it to him.

"We need more timely reporting of anything that's suspicious," Durbin said.

Veterinarian Hodgkins also called for better labeling of pet food. She said the AAFCO feeding label was an inadequate statement of nutrition and safety and gave pet owners a false sense of security.

It's virtually impossible to test every incoming product, said veterinarian Claudia Kirk, a former pet food developer and now an associate professor of medicine and nutrition at the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine. "I doubt that we can prevent all contaminations," she said.

Although the pet food industry is under greater regulation than portrayed in the media, there needs to be a more adequate way to track ingredients, she said.

Kirk also recommended the creation of a centralized place for vets and consumers to report problems to in the future. The FDA's hotline was overwhelmed with calls during the recent recall, and people were often unable to get through, she said.

All of the committee and panel members spoke of the importance of pets to American society, often referring to them as an extension of the family.

Robert Byrd (D-WVA), a senator for 49 years and chairman of the Senate Appropriations committee, made a rare guest appearance at the hearing, saying that he was highly concerned about the lack of information available to the public, particularly because of his close relationship with his dog, Baby.

For more dog food recall updates, visit [www.dogchannel.com/dog-news/dog-food-recall-updates.aspx](http://www.dogchannel.com/dog-news/dog-food-recall-updates.aspx).