Lessons From Air Safety

The United States started the year with two public tragedies: Peanut butter contaminated with salmonella killed nine people and sickened hundreds more, and an airplane carrying 49 people crashed into a house near Buffalo, N.Y., killing everyone on board, as well as one person on the ground. In both cases, government agencies charged with protecting public safety took swift action to determine what went wrong and prevent further

loss of life.

In the case of the plane disaster, information was easy to obtain. Within hours of the crash, the investigators had recovered the plane's voice and flight data recorders. Their final analysis of what caused the disaster may take 18 months, but they were able to rule out many possibilities and saw no reason to ground other aircraft. The public continued to fly.

Contrast this with the salmonella outbreak. It took about a month before someone who had eaten contaminated food became the subject of a public health investigation. Then investigators had to interview hundreds of people about what and where they had eaten, looking for foods only the sick had consumed. They tested samples of those foods. They found contamination in a wide variety of products, then looked for and discovered a common ingredient—peanut butter. They eventually learned where it had been produced and identified the source of the outbreak: a facility in Georgia owned by Peanut Corporation of America.

The process took about two months—a remarkable accomplishment given the complexity of the problem. But during that time, more people were exposed to contaminated products. In addition, by the middle of February, sales of all peanut butter had dropped by 25 percent.

Air crashes and food contamination are two very different problems, but both are matters of life and death, with

additional impacts on public confidence and the economy. For air safety, the government mandates the use of standard, high-technology data-capture systems to enable rapid analysis and containment of safety issues. For food safety, it does not.

But it could. RFID is the perfect technology for automatically tracking shipments of food products and ingredients. If food packaging contained RFID tags, investigators could quickly get an inventory of all the food in every place where sick people had eaten and look for patterns. Once they identified what caused the outbreak, an RFID-enabled food supply chain would make it much easier to quickly and accurately locate and recall all contaminated products.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is moving closer to adopting RFID for tracking cattle, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is considering the technology for tracking pharmaceuticals. Now is the time to get serious about tracking food. A plane crash may be more dramatic than a jar of poisonous peanut butter, but both are deadly.

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