

Dozens of Dog Deaths Now Linked to This Pentobarbital-Tainted Food

by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Earlier this year I wrote about a second incident of the euthanasia drug pentobarbital discovered in dog food. The first incident was in 2017 and involved Evanger's formulas. Then came the more recent recall of Gravy Train tainted with pentobarbital.

Background on Contaminated Gravy Train Dog Food

The Gravy Train situation was investigated by WJLA ABC 7 in Washington D.C. The station teamed up with Ellipse Analytics, a laboratory that specializes in testing food for contaminants. They tested 62 samples of over 24 brands of wet (canned) dog food for pentobarbital.

"After months of tests and re-tests, one brand repeatedly came back positive for pentobarbital," says WJLA. "In total, we tested 15 cans of Gravy Train. Nine cans — 60 percent of the sample — were positive for pentobarbital. And while the levels detected were not lethal, under federal law they are also not permitted at any concentration."

The WJLA investigation resulted in a class action lawsuit against J.M. Smucker/Big Heart Pet Brands filed on February 9 of this year in a U.S. District Court in California by a Missouri woman who believes Gravy Train may have contributed to the death of her Miniature Schnauzer.

The lawsuit wants Smucker/Big Heart to "... disclose its pet food sold throughout the United States is adulterated and contains pentobarbital and to restore monies to the consumers and businesses who purchased the Contaminated Dog Foods"

Later in February, Smucker/Big Heart voluntarily withdrew 10 varieties of Gravy Train dog food, along with certain shipments of Kibbles 'N Bits, Ol' Roy and Skippy. A complete list of the products pulled from store shelves — all of it canned dog food — can be found [here](#). In early March, the FDA notified Smucker/Big Heart that its voluntary removal of products was now considered a recall, based on a test confirming the presence of pentobarbital in the tallow the company used in the recalled pet foods.

The Plot Thickens

My friend and pet food consumer advocate Susan Thixton of Truth About Pet Food recently wrote an update regarding the class action lawsuit, noting a Master Consolidated Complaint filed on May 1. The newly filed document names 11 additional plaintiffs (pet owners), and as Susan says, "... reveals some damning information against pet food manufacturer Smucker."

The updated filing asserts that "... Defendant [Smucker/Big Heart] knew the Contaminated Dog Foods contained pentobarbital." The plaintiffs did not make this claim in the initial lawsuit, which means that between February 9 and May 1, their investigation revealed additional unfavorable details about Smucker's business practices.

On February 16, 2018, the FDA issued an alert to consumers about the recalled Gravy Train dog foods, stating very clearly that pentobarbital should not be in pet food.

A week or so later, Smucker issued a press release stating it had identified the source of the pentobarbital and described it as "a single ingredient (beef fat)." According to the updated filing, Smucker was less than forthcoming about what they tested to arrive at their conclusion:

"Defendant did not identify what exactly was tested — whether it was cans of the food pulled from the shelves, cans shipped directly from the manufacturing plant, and/or isolated samples of beef fat from the supplier. Defendant did claim the tested beef fat was sourced from cattle from the United States. However, Defendant has offered no information about how it identified this particular ingredient or whether it tested any other ingredients included in the recalled pet foods.

Defendant also did not specify what animals they tested the Contaminated Dog Foods for beyond cattle. When doing DNA testing, it must be determined beforehand what species will be looked for (i.e. dog, cat, cattle, horse, etc.). Defendant has not disclosed whether its testing looked for dog, cat, or horse DNA."

In early March, Smucker updated the above statement, claiming the animal fat was from "cow, pig and chicken and no other animal of the nine types tested." Smucker still didn't identify what types of animals were included in the testing, nor did it disclose the name of the manufacturing plant and/or supplier that is the suspected source of the tainted raw materials.

Later the same day, Smucker changed its statement yet again, now claiming the source of contamination was pig and chicken fat (no cow this time) and "no other animal of the nine types tested," again neglecting to name the nine types of animals tested. From the updated filing:

*"In the end, **over ninety million cans** of food manufactured and distributed by Defendant were recalled because of the inclusion of pentobarbital.*

Moreover, the testing results showed alarmingly high levels of pentobarbital in the tallow. Specifically, the current supply tested showed levels ranging from 801 ppb to 852 ppb, and the retained sample from 2017 contained pentobarbital at the level of 529 ppb.

Despite this, Defendant has publicly represented that the testing showed 'extremely low levels of pentobarbital do not pose a threat to pet safety' but failed to disclose or acknowledge the testing results that showed the high levels of pentobarbital in the tallow."

Smucker/Big Heart 'Knew or Recklessly Chose to Ignore That the Contaminated Dog Foods Were Adulterated Pet Food'

Smucker ultimately named the source of the contaminated tallow as a single supplier, JBS USA Holdings, Inc. and its rendering facility. According to the plaintiffs, JBS "knowingly" works with meat byproduct recycling, including animal byproducts not suitable for human consumption.

And in addition, JBS "has been plagued by investigations, recalls, and other red flag situations." This should have alerted Smucker that it needed to routinely confirm the safety and quality of products purchased from this supplier, especially since it claims to "regularly audit our suppliers and have assurances from them about the quality and specifications of the materials they supply us." From the updated filing:

"Yet Defendant chose to utilize JBS as a supplier even though it maintains that it keeps rigorous quality and supplier standards from 'start to finish' and performs three-tier auditing that includes third party auditors, to ensure pure ingredients and fair labor are used in its products, including the Contaminated Dog Foods.

Given this rigorous auditing process, Defendant knew or recklessly chose to ignore that the Contaminated Dog Foods were adulterated pet food as it retained samples of the tallow that should have been tested based on the claimed practices and standards by Defendant."

According to Susan Thixton, who's been conducting her own investigation of Big Pet Feed business practices for years, these clearly shady dealings are commonplace.

"Audits of pet food ingredient suppliers, [and] testing of ingredients for safety and quality are mostly to support a paper trail," she writes. "Little to no true quality control testing is ever performed.

Truck drivers delivering ingredients to pet food facilities have been instructed to carry in the truck cab 'clean' samples provided for testing; not a sample of what is actually delivered to the plant. Drivers have also shared that when a load of pet food ingredients is actually tested and fails, lot numbers are changed and the delivery is then accepted without question.

It has been shared multiple times from multiple individuals — the main goal is to keep the pet food plant in production ... not the quality of ingredients."

At an AAFCO meeting Susan attended a few years ago, pet food company employees shared that manufacturers keep a supply of clean samples on hand in the event regulatory authorities or auditors ask to test ingredients. "Rarely, if ever, are the actual ingredients used in a pet food tested by regulatory or auditors," she writes.

Naming the Dead

Sadly, the victims of Big Pet Food's unconscionable business practices and lack of regulatory oversight by the FDA and individual State Departments of Agriculture are innocent pets and their unsuspecting owners. From the Master Consolidated Complaint:

"In August 2017, Plaintiff Sebastiano's dog became weak and confused, began vomiting, had blood in his stool, lost weight, no longer wanted to eat, and had trouble standing and walking. At only [7] and a half years old, Samson died, on December 4, 2017.

Plaintiff Johnson ... fed the Contaminated Dog Foods to his thirteen border collie and Australian shepherd mixes he used as herding dogs for his cattle. Plaintiff Johnson had seven males and six female dogs that ranged from [10] months to approximately [7] years old. ... Devastatingly, Plaintiff Johnson lost all thirteen dogs, including one pregnant female, on January 14 and 15, 2018.

At that time, all of his dogs were showing symptoms of kidney failure so the veterinarian recommended that all thirteen be put down. All of the dogs were fed the Contaminated Dog Foods at the same time and all were sick within hours after eating the Contaminated Dog Foods. They subsequently all died within two days of eating the Contaminated Dog Foods.

Plaintiff Williamson purchased certain lines of the Contaminated Dog Foods ... and fed the Contaminated Dog Foods to her two Great Danes, Nova and Sadie. Sadie passed away on Wednesday, September 7, 2016, and Nova passed away on Sunday, January 22, 2017.

Plaintiff Todd purchased certain lines of the Contaminated Dog ... and fed the Contaminated Dog Foods to his American pit bull, Tito. Tito passed away on November 18, 2017." Plaintiff Brown purchased certain lines of the Contaminated Dog Foods ... She rescues stray dogs and has fed all of them the Contaminated Dog Foods.

Several of her dogs have died over the course of the class period, including: Speedy, a [2]-year-old Chihuahua mix who died in December 2016; Humpty, an [8]- or [9]-year-old lab-chow mix who died in November 2017; Elly Mae, a [10]-year-old lab-chow mix who died in December 2017; Sara, an [8]-year-old lab who died in October 2017; Red, an [8]-year-old lab who died November 2017; Mary, a [9]-year-old lab-chow mix who died in August 2017; Duke, a [7]-year-old Great Pyrenees who died in August 2017.

Plaintiff Mayo purchased the Contaminated Dog Foods ... and fed the Contaminated Dog Foods to her dogs, including Cocheese (a lab mix), Glory B (a chocolate lab mix), and Blade (an Alaskan husky mix). Most recently, Glory B passed away on or around February 2, 2018, two days after she consumed a can of Gravy Train with Chicken Chunks on or around January 31, 2018. On February 5, 2018, Plaintiff Mayo's cat, Midnight, also passed away after having accidentally ingested some of the Contaminated Dog Food fed to Glory B on January 31st."

Plaintiff Collins purchased the Contaminated Dog Foods ... and fed the Contaminated Dog Foods to his miniature poodle, Duffy. Duffy passed away in February 2018, soon after consuming a can of Gravy Train."

As Susan Thixton points out, had it not been for intrepid reporters at WJLA ABC 7 in D.C., specifically Lisa Fletcher, the deaths of these precious pets and probably many more would have gone unnoticed by the FDA and others.

"Nobody cared ... until they got caught," writes Susan. "That is the real crime of pet food — nobody cares if ingredients contain pentobarbital, violate law, or pets die ... until they get caught."

Protecting Furry Family Members From Poisoned Pet Food

Between low-grade ingredients, too-frequent recalls, and an exploding population of pets with chronic digestive issues, allergies and degenerative disease, it's no wonder so many pet parents are exploring homemade diets, fresh food diets made by smaller, transparent pet food producers, raw diets, and other alternatives to the dead, rendered, dubious, processed stuff.

My advice? Search this website for more information on choosing the best diet for your pet. There are dozens of videos and articles here that can help you become more knowledgeable about pet nutrition so that you can make the best diet choices for your own dog or cat.

If you want to help change the deceptive practices occurring in the pet food industry, I recommend becoming a member of the Association for Truth in Pet Food, which is the only organization out there committed to holding the regulatory agencies and AAFCO accountable.