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Kellogg CEO urges Congress to strengthen food safety system following salmonella outbreak

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WASHINGTON (AP) — It's not just consumer groups anymore that say the U.S. food safety system is broken.

The head of Kellogg Co., the world's largest cereal maker, planned to urge Congress on Thursday to revamp how the government polices his industry. Kellogg lost \$70 million in the recent salmonella outbreak, after it had to recall millions of packages of peanut butter crackers and cookies.

Chief executive David Mackay wants food safety placed under a new leader in the Health and Human Services Department. He also called for new requirements that all food companies have written safety plans, annual federal inspections of facilities that make high-risk foods and other reforms.

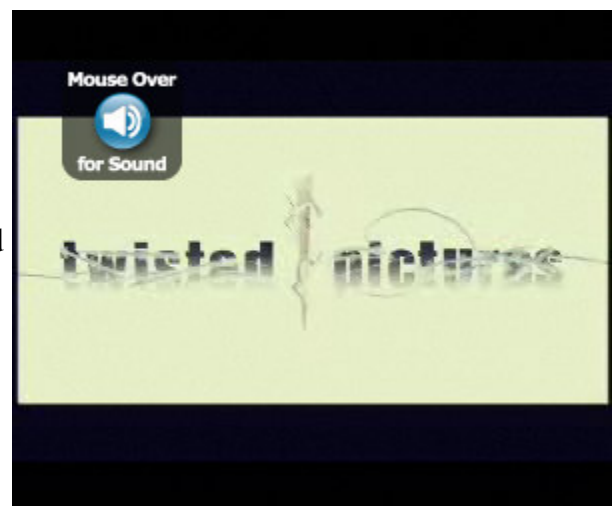
A copy of his statement, to be delivered before a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee, was obtained in advance by The Associated Press.

Mackay's strong call for major changes could boost President Barack Obama's efforts to overhaul the system. Last week Obama launched a special review of food safety programs, which are split among several departments and agencies, and rely in some cases on decades-old laws. Critics say more funding is needed for inspections and basic research.

"The recent outbreak illustrated that the U.S. food safety system must be strengthened," Mackay said in his prepared remarks. "We believe the key is to focus on prevention, so that potential sources of contamination are identified and properly addressed before they become actual food safety problems."

The salmonella outbreak has sickened at least 691 people and is blamed for nine deaths. The source was a small Georgia peanut processing plant, which allegedly shipped products that managers knew were contaminated with salmonella.

The plant produced not only peanut butter, but peanut paste, an ingredient found in foods from granola bars and dog biscuits, to ice cream and cake. More than 3,490 products have been recalled, including some Kellogg's Austin and Keebler peanut butter sandwich crackers. The Georgia plant has been shut



down and its owner, Peanut Corp. of America, is under criminal investigation by the Justice Department.

FDA inspectors swooped down on the Georgia plant in January and found multiple sanitary violations. The problems included moisture leaks, improper storage and openings that could allow rodents into the facility. FDA tests found salmonella contamination within the plant. After invoking bioterrorism laws, the FDA obtained Peanut Corp. records that showed the company's own tests repeatedly found salmonella in finished products.

How persistent problems at the Georgia plant managed to escape the attention of state inspectors and independent private auditors is one of the main unanswered questions in the investigation.

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