



South Carolina's Coordinated Food Safety Response

Transition, Storms and Outbreaks: Lessons from 2024

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Overview

On July 1, 2024, the South Carolina Department of Agriculture (SCDA) officially assumed full leadership of the state's Rapid Response Team (RRT), taking over responsibility for retail food safety, milk safety, and the manufactured food program – which includes cheese, butter, bottled water, soft drinks, and ice – from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC). This transfer consolidated all five-core food and feed safety programs under one unified oversight.

This expanded role was tested through a series of high-impact events in 2024, including Tropical Storm Debby, Hurricane Helene, and a national *Listeria monocytogenes* outbreak linked to Boar's Head deli meats.

This overview outlines the structural transition of the RRT, the implementation of disaster response strategies, and the coordination of a multistate foodborne illness investigation. It highlights the response tools utilized, multiagency collaboration, and operational challenges encountered – offering practical lessons to support the enhancement of food safety emergency response frameworks in other jurisdictions.

SCDA Food & Feed Departments

Retail Food Safety Department

Produce Safety Department

Milk Safety Department

Animal Feed Safety Department

Wholesale Food Safety Department

Figure 1. Illustration of SCDA's five food and feed safety departments: Retail, Produce, Milk, Animal Feed, and Wholesale Food Safety. Under the Consumer Protection Division, each department oversees inspections, complaint response, and regulatory compliance to protect public health across their respective areas.

Storm Response Efforts

Between August 6, 2024, and September 26, 2024, South Carolina's food and agriculture sectors were significantly impacted by Tropical Storm Debby, and Hurricane Helene. In response, the SCDA Rapid Response Team (RRT) activated its outreach system, notifying over 20,000 facilities statewide. Emergency surveys were deployed to impacted areas of the state to assess damage and recovery needs. In coordination with SC Emergency Management Division (SCMD) and Emergency Support Function-17 (ESF-17), SCDA supported recovery efforts and identified affected establishments. After experiencing the challenges of coordinating large-scale outreach and tracking, SCDA RRT purchased ReadyOp for departmental use – a secure platform that streamlines communication and improves tracking of storm-related closures – though full implementation across all departments is still underway.



Figure 2. Hurricane Helene Impact Assessment Photos. Top left: Flooding along the Broad River on Harbison State Forest (Behind SCFC HQ in Columbia). Top Right: Dam at Lake Monticello. Bottom: Broad River flooding in Newberry County. Photos courtesy of SC Forestry Commission taken during impact assessment flight September 30, 2024.



Figure 3. Hurricane Helene Impact Photo. Impact to pecan trees. Photo courtesy of SC Department of Agriculture.

Listeria and Deli Meats

In 2024, a multistate outbreak of *Listeria monocytogenes* linked to Boar's Head brand deli meats was investigated between July 2024 and January 2025. The outbreak led to the recall of over 7 million pounds of deli meat and was linked to 61 confirmed cases, 60 hospitalizations, and 10 deaths across 19 states. South Carolina was among the impacted states, with the outbreak potentially contributing to two deaths.

Epidemiologic, laboratory, and traceback data indicated that certain deli meats—particularly Boar's Head brand liverwurst—were contaminated with *Listeria*. In response, Boar's Head Ready-to-Eat Liverwurst and other deli products from the same processing facility were recalled. Unofficial food samples collected from a South Carolina residence tested positive for *Listeria monocytogenes*. The strain was confirmed by the South Carolina Department of Public Health Laboratory (DPH-PHL) and matched the outbreak strain found in other affected states.

The South Carolina Department of Agriculture (SCDA) Rapid Response Team (RRT) played a key role in the investigation by supporting traceback coordination, conducting onsite assessments, and facilitating communication with USDA and other state partners. A public health advisory was issued to South Carolina residents by RRT team members at DPH to raise awareness and promote prevention efforts.

This incident underscored the importance of rapid sampling, laboratory confirmation, public communication, and coordinated internal and external agency response in managing [USDA/CDC](#) - recognized multi-jurisdictional foodborne illness outbreaks.



Figure 4. Left: Trucks parked outside the warehouse at the South Carolina State Farmers Market. Photo courtesy of SCDA RFS Department. **Figure 5.** Right: Deli meat displayed in a retail cooler showing ready-to-eat products. Photo courtesy of CDC [website](#).

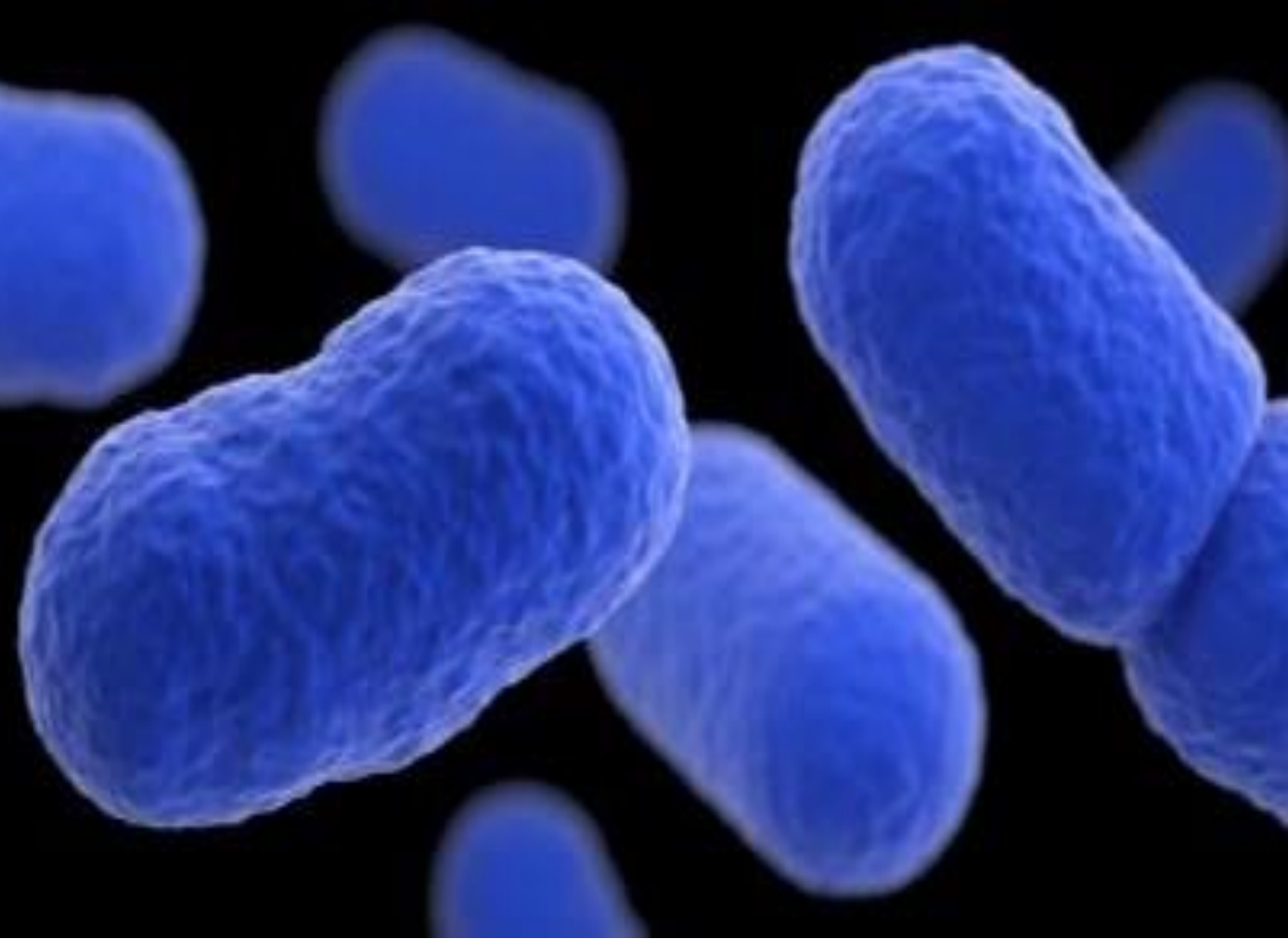


Figure 6. Microscopic image of *Listeria monocytogenes*, the bacterium responsible for *Listeriosis*. Image courtesy of CDC [website](#).

Quick Facts:

Quick facts: *Listeria* infection is the third leading cause of death from foodborne illness in the United States. CDC estimates that each year in the United States, 1,600 people are infected with *Listeria*, and 260 people die from the infection.

Food and Feed Safety Teams

Figures 7-13. Photos show SCDA's five food and feed safety departments – Retail Food, Produce, Milk, Animal Feed, and Wholesale Food – representing the Rapid Response Team. Photos courtesy of SCDA RRT.



Wholesale Food Safety Department: Regulates manufacturers, processors, and distributors, ensuring food for resale meets sanitation and safety standards through routine inspections.



Animal Feed Safety Department: Ensures the safety of animal feed through inspections and oversight of feed manufacturers and distributors to protect animal health and the food supply.



Milk Safety Department: Regulates all Grade A Dairy facilities in the state that produce, haul, process, package and distribute milk and milk products to ensure quality and prevent contamination.



Produce Safety Department: Regulates farms and facilities growing and harvesting fruits and vegetables, ensuring compliance with produce safety rules to reduce contamination risks.



Retail Food Safety Department: Oversees 24,000+ retail establishments statewide—including grocery stores, restaurants, food trucks, convenience stores, schools and other institutions—to ensure proper food safety, storage, and sanitation through routine risk-based inspections.



The South Carolina Department of Agriculture's Rapid Response Team (SCDA RRT) coordinates emergency response efforts related to food and feed safety across the state. The team brings together five key departments – Retail Food Safety, Produce Safety, Milk Safety, Animal Feed Safety, and Wholesale Food Safety – to quickly respond to foodborne illness outbreaks, natural disasters, recalls, and other emergencies affecting the food supply. This unified, multidepartment approach helps ensure rapid communication, effective investigations, and timely public health interventions.



Contact Information

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