

<http://americanshipper.com/NewWeb/News/shippers-newswire/logistics/159425--consumer-group-wants-fda-pallet-standards.html>

Source: **CH Robinson** Date Posted: **5/27/2010 10:01:31 AM**

Consumer group wants FDA pallet standards

A consumer group wants the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to set minimum sanitary and safety standards for all pallets -- wood or plastic -- that are used to transport food throughout the United States.

The National Consumers League (NCL) in late April tested pallets used to transport food in the Houston and Miami/Tampa areas. The test included 70 wood pallets and 70 plastic pallets, which were shipped overnight to an independent lab that provides testing for a wide range of commercial, industrial, regulatory and law enforcement clients.



"We believe it is essential to ensure that pathogens are not introduced at any step along the food transport system, from farm to fork," said Sally Greenberg, NCL's executive director. "Our testing of pallets has shown that these relatively unregulated but crucial parts of the food transportation system can and do harbor dangerous pathogens that could potentially contaminate the food supply."

The pallets were tested for both E. coli and listeria. The findings found that 10 percent of the wood pallets tested had E. coli present. In addition, 2.9 percent of the wood pallets tested positive for listeria, and half of these, when further tested, contained listeria monocytogenes, one of the most virulent food-borne pathogens.

Of the 70 plastic pallets tested one came back positive for E. coli. None of the other plastic pallets tested positive for pathogens, NCL said.

In addition, high aerobic plate counts, which reflect unsanitary conditions of the pallets, were found on about one-third of the wood pallets and one-fifth of the plastic pallets.

"Even if farmers, manufacturers, retailers and consumers were all to follow food safety plans and practices to the letter, the introduction of dangerous pathogens into the food supply during transport could negate those efforts," wrote Greenberg in a letter to the FDA outlining the NCL's test results and recommendations. "With approximately 2 billion pallets currently in circulation in the United States, the presence of dangerous pathogens on even a small percentage of those pallets presents a potential threat to the safety of the food supply."

NCL noted that several aspects of pallet use and storage present potential food safety concerns. If a pallet has the capacity to absorb water and harbor bacteria, it may be difficult or impossible to fully clean.

In a recently released report prepared for the FDA, Eastern Research Group highlighted the use of "good quality pallets" as a preventive measure. The FDA has said it will use the report to inform the development of new rules to increase the safety of food during transport.

The NCL warned that regardless of the materials from which it's made, any pallet that is not properly cleaned between trips increases the likelihood of cross-contamination. Storing a pallet outside, in unsanitary areas, in places accessible to vermin, or near potential contaminants increases the chances that the pallet could harbor dangerous pathogens.

"In conducting our testing, we observed that wood pallets -- which we found to have a higher incidence of pathogens -- are more often stored outside and exposed to weather, rodents, bird droppings and insects," NCL said. "Among additional considerations is the use of damaged wood pallets; splinters of sharp points can damage the packaging of products, creating an entryway for pathogens from which sealed products would otherwise be protected."