

August 10, 2009

Stephen F. Sundlof
Director, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
5100 Paint Branch Parkway, Building CPK1, Room 4B064
HFS-001
College Park, MD 20740

Michael R. Taylor
Senior Advisor to the Commissioner
Office of the Commissioner
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
10903 New Hampshire Ave, Room 2206
W01-2217
Silver Spring, MD 20993-0002

Dear Messrs. Sundlof and Taylor:

By way of introduction, I am the Chief Executive Officer of iGPS Company, LLC, which operates the world's first pallet rental service providing the nation's supply chain with shipping pallets made from 100% recyclable plastic which are embedded with radio frequency identification (RFID) tags. Our service was created in part to address issues of hygiene and product traceability in the supply chain, especially with regard to food products. The iGPS pallet provides a welcome alternative to the nation's aging supply of multi-use wood pallets that we believe may present heightened food safety risks.

I am writing to request that the Food and Drug Administration address a number of potential public health concerns related to the use of wood shipping pallets in the manufacture, storage, transport, and processing of FDA-regulated products, including foods -- and the role wood pallets might play in contributing to food safety risks in the United States. Although wood pallets have been in use for many years, given the recognition that wood products can harbor contaminants within their porous surface, we are concerned that wood pallets could present a serious public health concern if they become contaminated and used in food-contact scenarios. Specifically, we request that FDA issue guidance or recommendations on the safety of such products for these uses.

We believe that the issue of wood pallet safety is both timely and relevant in light of the recent recommendations of the President's Food Safety Working Group, which recommends a new, public-health focused approach to food safety and FDA's recent initiatives regarding food safety and prevention of foodborne illnesses. We note that FDA has recently published three draft guidances designed to help growers and others across the supply chain minimize or eliminate microbial contamination in tomatoes, leafy greens, and melons. These guidance

documents set forth several recommendations to ensure appropriate measures are taken to prevent the spread of pathogens, bacteria, and other contaminants commonly associated with foodborne illnesses. These recommendations do not specifically address safety concerns associated with the use of wood materials in the food processing activities.

As you may know, there are an estimated 1 billion wood pallets in the United States, both single-use pallets and multi-use pallets which are pooled for multiple rentals by unrelated shippers. These pallets are used to ship virtually everything in the US, including industrial products, pharmaceuticals and food.

The properties of wood and other materials used in pallet construction, as well as common practices in the use of wood pallets, may present serious risks to our food supply. We believe the risks may be particularly acute with regard to multi-use wood pallets, as the quality of these pallets has deteriorated in recent years. Specifically, we request that the FDA address the following issues—

- The extent to which wood pallets (especially multi-use wood pallets that come in contact with food and absorb liquids from meat or produce they carry), can contribute to opportunities for cross-contamination of food and other matter. Wood is a highly porous material that may with multiple use harbor E.coli, salmonella and other dangerous bacteria. We believe that this is a concern acknowledged in FDA publications, which have pointed to the absorptive nature of food and the risk of bacterial contamination presented when wood products can come in contact with cut produce or prepared foods in connection with certain food processing activities. Specifically, in draft guidance issued during 2008 for refrigerated or frozen ready-to-eat foods (“RF-RTE”), the FDA recommends “that you not use wood pallets in areas where RF-RTE foods are processed or exposed or in other areas for wet processing and storage.”¹
- The potential effects on health and safety of “engineered wood” components which incorporate urea formaldehyde, a substance classified by various authorities as either a probable or known carcinogen. Formaldehyde fumes (off-gassing) may infiltrate food packaging and other FDA-regulated products.
- Other sources of contamination of food due to use of wood pallets. For example, common multi-use pallets are constructed with 150 or more steel nails which, with multiple use, rust and often protrude from wood surfaces. These nails often puncture food packaging and may come into contact with food products.

¹ Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. Guidance for Industry: Control of Listeria Monocytogenes in Refrigerated Or Frozen Ready-to-Eat Foods. Draft ed. Washington, D.C.: Food and Drug Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, February 2008.
<<http://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceComplianceRegulatoryInformation/GuidanceDocuments/FoodProcessingHACCP/ucm073110.htm>>.



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We believe that each of the above issues may present serious concerns regarding the safety of our food supply and other products regulated by FDA, and thus constitute an important public health priority. These issues are both significant and timely, given recent food safety concerns and the Agency's stated commitment to ensuring the continued safety of the U.S. food supply. We respectfully request that the FDA address the safety of wood pallets by adopting appropriate measures to help mitigate the risks presented by wood pallets.

Sincerely,

Bobby L. Moore
Chairman/Chief Executive Officer