



Lessons for the refrigerated freight transportation industry from the food poisoning crisis



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The outbreak of listeriosis at the Maple Leaf Foods plant in Toronto earlier this year has brought the issue of food safety to the forefront. According to a report in *The Globe and Mail*, there are approximately 10 million cases of food poisoning in Canada each year, and at least 500 deaths, due in large part to poor food handling by consumers. While the report does not contain statistics on the annual number of food poisoning incidents directly related to improper food manufacturing and freight handling, there exists the potential risk of massive outbreaks of disease.

While much of the focus of the listeriosis incident was on the one Toronto-based food plant, the fact is that all food (and pharmaceutical) shipments arrive by truck or rail at a processing location and are then shipped by truck, rail or air to distributors, retailers and consumers. Many of these shipments move on temperature-controlled vehicles, either at a specific temperature (or temperature range) or in a frozen state. An improperly maintained refrigerated vehicle can result in not only mould on eggs, stale cupcakes or wilted lettuce; they can also result in the formation of bacteria that can lead to illness and death. Of course they can also have severe consequences for those transportation companies that provide refrigerated service.

The recent downturn in the economies of the US and Canada and the weakness in certain industry sectors, such as automobiles and pulp and paper, has encouraged some carriers to enter the refrigerated transportation industry or to expand their business in this market segment. While people may cut back on purchases of cars and clothing during tough times, we all have to eat and we all (or many of us) have to take our medications on a daily basis. The attraction of moving food or drugs is that there is greater consistency to the freight flows. Of course, this is not entirely true. In fact, for those carriers handling fresh produce (e.g. watermelons or tomatoes), there can be significant seasonality components.

Moving produce, pharmaceuticals or frozen food is very different from moving a load of newsprint. In the latter case, you need a truck that can handle the weight and is free from leaks and jagged edges. The worst thing you can do with a load of newsprint is get some of the rolls wet or tear some of the sheets. In the case of a refrigerated unit that breaks down, the

potential consequences can be life-threatening.

When you enter the refrigerated transportation industry, the bar is raised. In addition to the standard operating procedures associated with managing a "dry" fleet, you need to add a whole new set of variables. Not all reefer carriers are created equal. Here are some thoughts that carriers and shippers should consider.

Carriers need to be very focused on the following:

- Service life of the refrigeration unit;
- Maintenance procedures and schedule;
- Driver training in the operation of refrigeration units;
- Driver procedures for monitoring the refrigeration unit while the vehicle is en route;
- Refrigeration unit pre-trip checklist;
- Use of satellite tracking to monitor the temperature and performance of the unit remotely;
- Locations for refrigeration unit repair en route in the event of a failure; and
- Establishing and maintaining written procedures that are followed meticulously by employees throughout the company.

As a shipper, you need to be very focused on the following items:

- Creating a comprehensive carrier evaluation checklist that looks at a broad range of variables;
- Visual inspections and documentation of all vehicles that arrive at your dock, whether for inbound or outbound freight to check for door seals, hinges, latches and vent doors that are not properly aligned and for correct temperature settings for the refrigeration unit;
- Obtaining a set of written procedures from your carriers on how they handle temperature-controlled freight;
- Utilization of "hobos" or other recording devices to ensure a consistent temperature is maintained throughout the trip; and
- Carrier scorecards that measure some of the variables that are specific to reefer freight.

There are many fine companies in this industry that have implemented and maintained good operating procedures for years. However, with the current economic downturn, some companies may try to extend the life of a reefer beyond its limits.

Clearly, there is much that carriers and shippers can do to run a well-maintained reefer fleet and to manage a safe and secure cold supply chain. CT&L