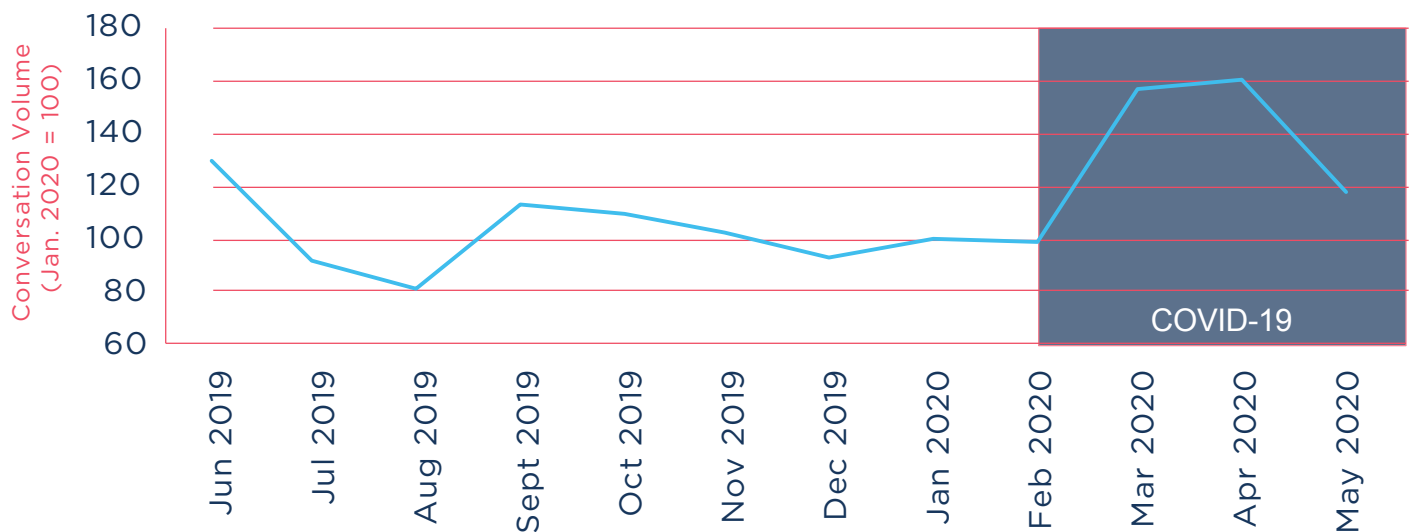


Pandemic Pressure on Food Safety

Food safety has consistently ranked high in The Intel Distillery's quarterly Top Ten Topics. And for good reason — preventing foodborne illness and keeping people safe are core tenets of our food production system. Against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, attention to food safety spiked in tandem with broader concerns about health in March and April. The bulk of conversations came after the CDC [stated](#) that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) does not spread through food. As the supply chains stabilized and society settled into a “new normal” in May, influential figures in the food industry eventually shifted attention away from safety (and COVID-19 as a whole). Below, we examine some of the themes that sparked conversations about practices across farms, factories and foodservice.

FOOD SAFETY CONVERSATIONS SPIKED



PRODUCERS LEAN ON PREVENTION



Salmonella

As the first step in food production, farms feature prominently in approaches to limiting the spread of foodborne illness. Indeed, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure down the line.

- In a May 1 report, the CDC [found](#) that incidents of foodborne illness rose for most pathogens. However, the report noted that the spread of *Salmonella* infections had [slowed](#) due to increased use of vaccines in poultry flocks (The Poultry Site).
- The FDA [completed](#) an investigation into *E. coli* outbreaks linked to leafy greens, attributing the contamination to the close proximity of livestock and lettuce operations.
- The Pew Charitable Trusts [suggested](#) using root cause analysis of previous foodborne illness outbreaks as a means to reduce future outbreaks. While not limited to farms, the practice could help farms comply with a Food Safety Modernization Act rule that [took effect](#) on January 27.

“DESPITE PROGRESS IN FOOD SAFETY, WE ALL KNOW THAT THERE ARE STILL AREAS OF INADEQUATELY CONTROLLED RISK IN OUR FOOD SUPPLY. ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS PROVIDES A FRAMEWORK FOR TYING TOGETHER THE BITS AND PIECES.”

– JOHN TILDEN, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
(THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS)

PROCESSING'S PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

Food processing and manufacturing facilities drew substantially more attention during the coronavirus crisis due to outbreaks in the workforce. This provided a platform for unions and activist groups to additionally criticize food safety regulations.

- The FDA [halted](#) foreign inspections on March 10, [suspended](#) domestic inspections on March 18 and [relaxed](#) labeling policies throughout April and May. The agency [reiterated](#) its stance on May 11, stating that it will work with CDC to resume inspections as states reopen.
- Union of Concerned Scientists [highlighted](#) the need to balance inspectors' safety with food safety but then raised concerns about "cracks in the inspection system."
- After USDA adjusted how its inspectors cover plants, Food & Water Watch [criticized](#) the agency for "removing safeguards on food while everyone else is fighting a pandemic."

AS IS TRUE WITH PATHOGENS, IS ALSO LIKELY TRUE WITH COVID-19: THE MORE YOU TEST, THE MORE YOU WILL FIND.

- SHAWN STEVENS, FOOD SAFETY LAWYER (MEATINGPLACE)

WHILE IT IS CRITICAL TO CONTINUE TO PROTECT YOUR EMPLOYEES FROM THE VIRUS AND YOU SEEK TO RECOVER YOUR OPERATIONS, IT IS JUST AS CRITICAL TO ENSURE THAT YOU KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE SAFETY OF THE PRODUCTS BEING PRODUCED AND THE SAFETY OF THOSE WHO WILL CONSUME THEM, SO DOJ DOESN'T SET ITS SIGHTS ON YOU.

- DAVID ACHESON, FOOD SAFETY CONSULTANT, THE ACHESON GROUP

PASSING JUDGMENT

In 2020, the Department of Justice (DOJ) levied its two largest fines for food safety failures in food production and foodservice — demonstrating the department's commitment to hold companies accountable.

- Chipotle Mexican Grill [faced](#) a \$25 million settlement for a series of foodborne illness outbreaks between 2015 and 2018.
- The DOJ [penalized](#) ice cream maker Blue Bell with a \$19.35 million fine and charged its president for covering up outbreaks of *Listeria* in 2015.
- U.S. PIRG Education Fund [published](#) a scorecard that ranked supermarket chains based on their policies for notifying consumers about food recalls. The group assigned most chains failing grades.

LOOKING AHEAD

As the pandemic continues to affect food production, influential voices have speculated about how food safety measures might change.

- It's unclear how much of an impact loosened regulations will have on foodborne illness outbreaks. Food safety lawyer Shawn Stevens [noted](#) that beef recalls remained surprisingly low for 2020, meanwhile "recalls of FDA-regulated products appear to be at or even above average compared to previous years."
- On January 19, food safety attorney Bill Marler [filed](#) a petition to declare certain strains of *Salmonella* as adulterants in meat products. Food Safety News [reported](#) that the public comment period for the petition ended May 25, setting the stage for USDA to decide on the issue by fall.

SALIENT FOOD SAFETY EVENTS

A handful of safety-specific events broke through the hubbub surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, sparking conversations among influential figures in the food industry.

January 19	Food safety advocates petition to consider <i>Salmonella</i> an adulterant in meat products
February 26	Jimmy John's pulls sprouts from stores following <i>E. coli</i> outbreak and FDA warning letter
March 18	FDA suspends domestic food safety inspections due to COVID-19
April 21	DOJ fines Chipotle \$25 million for foodborne illness outbreaks
May 1	DOJ fines Blue Bell \$19.35 million for <i>Listeria</i> outbreaks
May 1	CDC publishes report on foodborne illness outbreaks
June 7	World Health Organization celebrates World Food Safety Day