Tons of contaminated poultry sold for human consumption in Britain

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At the end of December, a Hull court sentenced five men to over 24 years imprisonment for supplying potentially lethal condemned poultry for human consumption.

In 1996, Environmental Health Service staff in the South Yorkshire town of Rotherham first uncovered the scandal, which involved recycling more than 1,300 tonnes of condemned chicken and turkey meat that had been declared unfit for human consumption.

The gang had organized a secret operation hidden away in factory sheds on anonymous industrial estates. They used chemicals to prepare an illegal product, which they moved in the dead of night in unmarked vans up and down the country. Payment was often by cash in pub car parks. To cover their tracks and try and launder more than £3 million in profits the scam netted, they created a false paper trail with mountains of forged invoices and other documents.

The gang established a secret de-boning operation, in a factory shed running for up to 20 hours a day involving 12 staff. The stinking meat, often covered in slime, mould or faeces was hosed down, soaked in brine to remove the stench, then sliced up to remove whatever scraps of pink meat that could be recovered and re-sold. To further cover their dirty trade, they mixed the tainted meat with good supplies and the potentially lethal mixture was supplied to butchers' shops, market traders, restaurants and supermarkets across the country.

More than a dozen raids were conducted nationwide and a complex operation uncovered, which produced half a million pages of documentation that had to be sifted through in preparing the case against the gang.

The five convicted of conspiracy to supply unfit meat to the human food chain were former meat factory manager Andrew Boid; assistant factory manager Darren Bibby; Peter Tantram, who ran Cliff Top Pet Foods; John McGinty and Arnold Smith, both food brokers.

Another member of the gang, Clive Boid (Andrew Boid's father) was found guilty on a separate charge of selling pet food meat as fit for human consumption and is awaiting sentencing. Three other food brokers were acquitted, although the prosecution claimed they had full knowledge of the illegal activity.

On passing sentence, Judge Peter Heppel QC said, “It is difficult to find words sufficient to describe the appalling nature of the main fraud in this case. Fraud of this type on this scale is unprecedented in this country.”

Those at the centre of the illegal operation have longstanding connections with the multi-billion food processing and meat industry. Boid Snr. is a former director of Prosper DeMulder, the UK's biggest meat rendering operation. Together with his son Andrew and Bibby, they ran Wells By-Products, one of Britain's largest poultry rendering firms. The company had at one time processed 85 percent of the condemned poultry from the slaughterhouses and food manufacturers. To provide a cover story for the huge quantities of condemned meat they bought, the gang involved Tantram, who ran Cliff Top Pet Foods, with the tainted meat ostensibly destined for pet food.

The scam was carefully planned and prepared. Prosecutor Ben Nolan QC told the court that the gang had first tried out their system in a smaller operation nicknamed the “Preston Sausage Fraud”. This had involved 7, 910 packets of frozen sausages being offered for sale up to a year-and-a-half after their sell-by date. The facilities and systems used to offload the spoiled sausages were then employed on a bigger scale with the condemned poultry that was reintroduced to the human food chain.

Nolan described Sheffield meat broker John McGinty's position in the fraud as pivotal. “It was through his energies and activities that the product changed its identity from pet food to food which was ostensibly wholesome and marketable to the human food chain.” According to Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, which footed the £500,000 bill for the investigation, “Food brokers, the middle men and women who buy and sell meat products over the phone, are largely uncontrolled and the responsibility is left with the trader to register with the local authority. Unscrupulous traders can avoid monitoring by exploiting the weakness of the system.”

The four-year investigation to bring the gang to court was headed by Lewis Coates, an Environmental Health Officer for Rotherham council with the support of two colleagues. Speaking after the successful prosecution, he said, “It is difficult to assess the risk to public health from food poisoning, carcinogens and chemical contamination as a result of eating this condemned meat. This investigation was potentially only part of a much wider problem. As it proceeded, officers became aware that similar scams were operating throughout the country.”

Interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Coates said, “the loopholes in the legislation are still there, such as the fact that there is no staining of unfit poultry meat”, unlike condemned beef which is covered in an indelible dye to prevent it being reintroduced into

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the human food chain. Coates said he would not be surprised if similar scandals were operating elsewhere in the country, and was critical of the lack of support shown from the beginning of the case by the central government department responsible for monitoring food production, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). “We did approach MAFF, as did some of the Rotherham Councillors, for aid right from the start of the investigation right through to when all the charges were laid two years later. We got very little help from them. Their officers were present on about two raids that we did. They were told to take a background role.” Coates said.

“MAFF had the duty to enforce legislation in a lot of the places we were going in to, but we were in the unfortunate position that since we had discovered the [illegal] trade, we had to follow it through. We were told on a number of occasions that they [MAFF] did not have the resources and manpower or money to investigate something on this scale, which did not help us.”

Another Environmental Health Service worker was quoted in the press saying, “It is ridiculous that investigations like this have been left to local authorities. The Food Standards Agency should appoint a special investigative team to break the illicit trade in unfit poultry and other meat.”

Changes in regulations covering condemned poultry in the early 1990s undoubtedly made the scam easier to organise. As part of the wave of deregulation throughout the food industry under the Thatcher Conservative government in the 1980s and 90s, regulations allowing local authorities to monitor the movement of condemned poultry meat were lifted and the policy of staining the meat ended. A statement by Rotherham Council following the court case says, “The lack of such controls has contributed to the spread of this meat laundering scam.”

Figures from the MAFF website reveal a massive growth in the consumption of poultry, which is heavily promoted as a “healthy” and cheap alternative to red meat. Whereas the eating of beef has declined to half its 1950 level, the popularity of chicken and turkey products shows a 23 times increase in consumption over the same period.

Cheaper poultry dishes have also become a staple for many on low incomes or benefits. Judge Heppel particularly criticised the gang for targeting discount supermarkets such as Kwiksave and Netto that are generally sited in poorer working class districts and are frequented by those on restricted budgets. The gang will have been aware that in such outlets, a self-employed butcher usually runs the meat counters as a franchise. Unlike the larger supermarket chains, the discounters would be unlikely to have any testing procedures for the meat sold by their butchery department, decreasing the likelihood of detection.

As well as relaxing regulations for the control of condemned meat, cut backs and more “business-friendly” policies introduced by the Tories meant a reduction in the level of sampling undertaken by official bodies to detect potential food problems. MAFF figures show that despite a declining level of sampling, the percentage of problems found increased. However, the number of prosecutions carried out when problem samples were detected more than halved between 1991and 1995.

In the midst of the BSE crisis in 1990, the Conservative government introduced the Food Safety Act which had the effect of further undermining consumer protection. In a paper published recently in *Public Administration* journal, authors Richard Schofield and Jean Shaoul conclude, “the financial pressures on the food industry were such that food hygiene was largely dependent upon external regulation and enforcement. But the deficiencies in the conception, design and implementation of the Food Safety Act, which was fundamentally deregulatory and privileged producer interests, permitted the food safety problems to grow.” (*Food Safety Regulation and the Conflict of Interest: The Case of Meat Safety and E.coli 0157*)

When Labour came to office in 1997, it promised to create a Food Standards Agency (FSA) to protect consumer interests, in contrast to MAFF which had been discredited during the BSE crisis and was widely regarded as nothing more than a lobby for agribusiness. The FSA has so far revealed itself to be a more or less toothless body, which shares MAFF's main concern not to undermine public “confidence” in British food products. The FSA describe the loophole in regulations governing contaminated poultry as an “anomaly” and have downplayed the implications of the poultry scam. They are quoted in the press saying there was no evidence of an illicit trade in condemned poultry outside the Rotherham case.

Throughout the twentieth century, progressive legislation was introduced to try and ensure certain minimum standards of food safety and hygiene. Today, the conditions revealed in this latest food scandal recall the words of American author and socialist Upton Sinclair. In his exposure of the terrible conditions in the Chicago stockyards, he wrote in 1906, “...they could now study the whole of the spoiled-meat industry on the inside, and read a new and grim meaning into that old Packingtown jest—that they use everything of the pig except the squeal.” (*The Jungle*, available online at http://www.litrix.com/jungle/jungl001.htm#1)

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