

Tainted eggs sicken thousands across US

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A huge food recall has expanded in the past week to include 550 million eggs, packaged and sold under 17 different brands in many states across the US, that are potentially contaminated with salmonella.

Some 380 million eggs, originating from the Galt, Iowa-based Wright County Egg company, have been identified as the source of a mass outbreak of salmonella poisoning. A second Iowa egg producer, Hillandale Farms, announced a major recall on August 20 of 170 million eggs distributed to 14 states that were also potentially tainted with salmonella.

Salmonella Enteritidis is a pathogen that can be introduced into food through contact with feces. In the large-scale egg industry, rodent infestations spread salmonella bacteria through the grain fed to breeder hens, which is then transferred to eggs, including both the outer shell and within the yolk.

In humans, salmonella causes fever, diarrhea, vomiting, and abdominal pain. The bacteria can also enter the bloodstream, causing severe complications, including endocarditis and arthritis, and fatal infections. Young children, the elderly, and those in frail health are at highest risk of such complications.

At least 266 cases of illness in California have been definitively linked to Wright County Egg, along with seven cases in Minnesota, eight in Colorado, and many in other states. The federal Food and Drug Administration, which is responsible for overseeing shell egg safety, lists numerous lots of eggs as potentially tainted. They were shipped as far back as May 16 to foodservice companies, distribution centers and wholesalers in 17 states throughout the West, Southwest, Plains, and the Midwestern regions.

On August 13, the company enacted a recall of shell eggs from three of its five farms, encompassing 228 million eggs. After federal epidemiologists reported links to the other two farms, Wright County Egg was compelled to conduct a wider recall, including eggs

shipped out months ago that are likely long since consumed.

No deaths have been attributed to the present outbreak. However, many thousands of people have been sickened, including some seriously enough to require hospitalization. Nearly 2,000 cases of salmonella poisoning were reported between May and July, according to federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention epidemiologist Christopher Braden, who told the media this figure was 1,300 times higher than normal for the time frame. Speaking at a telephone news conference, Braden warned, "I would anticipate we will be seeing more illnesses reported and likely as a result of this outbreak."

The official count is likely a drastic underestimate of the real incidence rate. According to the CDC, only one in 38 cases of salmonella poisoning is clinically diagnosed and reported to health officials. It is likely that tens of thousands of people have already been made ill by the tainted eggs.

The CDC estimates that as many as 81 million cases of food-related illnesses occur each year in the US, causing 300,000 hospitalizations and up to 9,000 deaths.

Wright County Egg claims it is voluntarily in compliance with federal guidelines. However, an August 18 *New York Times* report noted that the company's owner, Jack DeCoster, has been fined on multiple occasions for environmental, health and safety violations, animal cruelty, as well as abuse of workers at his other companies. Among other incidents, the *Times* cited a 1997 investigation by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration that found DeCoster had forced workers to handle animal feces and dead chickens with their bare hands and to live in rat-infested trailers. Then-Labor Secretary Robert Reich described the company as "an agricultural sweatshop."

Official data suggests that the conditions at Wright County Egg are not the exception in the industry. Eggs are among the most frequently reported sources of salmonella poisoning. According to a 2009 report by Citizens for Science in the Public Interest, based on CDC statistics going back to 1990, tainted eggs were responsible for 11,163 reported cases of illness in at least 352 separate outbreaks.

This latest mass outbreak of food poisoning reveals yet again the vulnerability of the population to the most easily preventable illnesses. For the past decade, governmental oversight and consumer protections have been systematically loosened, with federal and state agencies functioning less as regulatory bodies and more as means of ensuring that the food industry has access to consumer markets.

Interviewed by *Time* magazine in June, FDA's consumer-safety officer Cecilia Wolyniak explained, "In many cases they do agree [to a recall]... But there are some cases where they won't and then we do what's called an FDA-requested recall, where we send them a notification and say we expect them to take action."

"The lack of mandatory recall always surprises people," FDA deputy commissioner for foods Mike Taylor told the magazine. "It'd help if we had the authority to back [our recall requests] up."

The *Time* report noted that at present, the FDA has "only about 450 people authorized to do on-site inspections of the over 156,000 FDA-regulated firms." The FDA "tries to inspect food facilities once a year if they make easily contaminated products like seafood and every few years if they don't," the article noted.

Food safety programs have been steadily dismantled, starved of funds and stripped of any enforcement capabilities at the same time that the food supply has vastly expanded and internationalized. Over the past several years, millions of Americans have suffered bouts of food poisoning from basic diet staples including beef, tomatoes, spinach, lettuce, and peanuts. In some of these cases, the federal authorities were aware of contamination problems at producers for years before outbreaks occurred, and nothing was done to prevent them.

Masses of people who have no way of detecting tainted food or preventing outbreaks are exposed to hazards that federal agencies have no legal authority to

prevent. Instead, the CDC, FDA, and US Department of Agriculture are limited to issuing requests to companies to voluntarily warn the public and recall contaminated products.

No punitive charges or fines have been announced in relation to the tainted egg recall. For its part, Wright County Egg is seeking to turn a profit in the midst of the outbreak. A company statement issued August 13 announced that, rather than destroying the contaminated eggs, Wright County Egg "has decided to divert its existing inventory of shell eggs from the recalled plants to a breaker, where they will be pasteurized to kill any Salmonella bacteria present."



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