Egg recall exposes unsafe US food supply

Naomi Spencer
25 August 2010

The recall of more than half a billion eggs potentially tainted with salmonella is expanding to more states and companies across the US a week after it was first announced. The eggs, all produced by two closely linked Iowa companies, Wright County Egg and Hillandale Farms, are responsible for a mass outbreak of food poisoning that has sickened thousands since May.

In a separate development, Tyson Foods, the country's largest meat producer, announced Tuesday a recall of 380,000 pounds of deli meats distributed to Wal-Mart stores nationwide that are potentially contaminated with Listeria.

The recalls underscore the vulnerability of the population to the most preventable illnesses because of the subordination of public health and food safety to the profit motive. Corporations have been allowed to engage in blatantly unsafe practices, with nominal fines, while the government has rejected even the most basic steps required to improve food safety.

According to an August 22 *Washington Post* report, federal investigations into 26 salmonella outbreaks traced 15 back to Wright County Egg, which recalled 380 million eggs last week.

No deaths have so far been recorded, but salmonella causes fever, severe vomiting and diarrhea and abdominal pain. It can also cause fatal infections if the bacteria enters the bloodstream. At least 1,300 cases of officially reported salmonella poisoning between May and July may have been caused by tainted eggs.

This figure likely grossly understates the real rate of illness. According to government figures, approximately one in every 38 cases of salmonella poisoning is officially recorded—meaning that the true number of cases caused by the tainted eggs could number in the tens of thousands.

Wright County Egg's owner, Austin "Jack" DeCoster, has a long history of egregious health, labor and environmental violations, as well as numerous charges of animal cruelty. DeCoster has family and substantial financial ties to Hillandale Farms, which recalled 170 million eggs Friday, and the two companies purchase their chickens and feed through the same suppliers.

On August 21, the *Washington Post* published a partial list of violations and allegations against DeCoster, dating back to the mid-1990s. In 1996, the Labor Department fined DeCoster $3.6 million for brutal conditions at his Turner egg farm.

Then-Labor Secretary Robert Reich, writing for the *Christian Science Monitor* blog August 24, commented, "DeCoster agreed to pay a $2 million penalty (the most we could throw at him) for some of the most heinous workplace violations I'd seen. His workers had been forced to live in trailers infested with rats and handle manure and dead chickens with their bare hands. It was an agricultural sweatshop."

At the same time, DeCoster was charged by the state of Iowa for violating environmental laws because of manure runoff in rivers from his chicken and hog farm operations. In 2001 the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that DeCoster was a "repeat violator" and forbidden to expand hog farming operations in the state.

In the same year, the *Washington Post* notes, DeCoster Farms of Iowa settled a complaint for $1.5 million, brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, that the company had subjected 11 undocumented Mexican women workers to a "sexually hostile work environment," including rape and sexual assault by their supervisors. The next year, the DeCoster family was fined by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration for multiple violations in Maine, and DeCoster paid $3.2 million to settle another lawsuit filed by Mexican workers over deplorable housing and working conditions.

In 2006, the Ohio state department of agriculture

© World Socialist Web Site

revoked permits of Ohio Fresh Eggs because the company's co-owners did not disclose that DeCoster had paid for the purchase of the operations almost in entirety, putting up $126 million. The other owners, who include Orland Bethel, the founder of Hillandale Farms, kept DeCoster's involvement secret in order to avoid a state background check on his violator status in Iowa.

A 2006 *Forbes* investigative report detailed foul conditions at Ohio Fresh Farms that are similar to the conditions at Wright County Egg and that contributed to the widespread salmonella contamination. *Forbes* reported, "In the three years of its existence the company has incurred dozens of enforcement actions from the state, up to seven issued in a single day, for such violations as promoting swarms of flies at 'extreme levels' and discarding empty vaccine vials, mixed in with manure in a vacant field." Inspectors found salmonella on-site, and the operation was found to be one the worst emitters of ammonia, which contributes to smog and causes lung and skin irritation.

DeCoster's actions are far from unique. The US meat and poultry industry is notorious for such conditions. Across the food and drug industry, product contaminations are so common that recalls are announced on a daily basis. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 81 million cases of food-related illnesses occur each year nationwide, causing up to 9,000 deaths.

The federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which oversees shell egg production, is complicit in allowing this state of affairs. With only 450 inspectors charged with visiting 156,000 sites, operations such as Wright County Egg are inspected by the FDA fewer than one time in a year, and many deplorable conditions—overcrowding of animals, high levels of steroid and antibiotic use—are accepted as permissible industry norms.

Rather than protecting the health of the population, the FDA functions more as a mechanism for companies to access consumers that have no way of determining whether the food products they are presented with are safe. The FDA's food safety program has had its funding halved over the past decade, and it lacks even the ability to force a company to recall an unsafe product. Instead, it can only request that companies voluntarily issue a recall, which companies can simply refuse to do.

Significantly, a survey of FDA scientists registered a broad lack of confidence in the agency's capacity to protect the population from food-borne illness in eggs. The survey, conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists before the current salmonella outbreak, found that only half of FDA scientists believed that the food safety system was an adequate protection against becoming sickened by tainted eggs.

The Obama administration, and congressional Democrats in particular, have strained to appear stringent on federal regulations in the wake of the recall, including pointing to legislation issued in July that would require regular testing for contamination and cleanliness. However, this minimal increase in enforcement powers will not even go into effect until 2012.

Moreover, in crafting its new egg safety rules, the FDA rejected a proposal to require vaccination of hens against salmonella, according to an August 24 report by the *New York Times*. The vaccinations are credited with a 95 percent drop in human salmonella illnesses in Britain over the past ten years. It costs about one penny per dozen eggs.

The relation of the FDA to the food industry is indicative of the relation of the government to private companies as a whole. At every step, from production through to marketing, public health is dependent on voluntary safety measures of big business.

In this respect, the food poisoning outbreaks bare a similarity to recent disasters in the energy industry. In the pursuit of greater profits, cost-cutting on safety and basic conditions on the part of Massey Energy, BP, and giant food industry corporations have all created catastrophes for the working class. In spite of repeated violations, including practices that endanger the health of millions of people, criminals such as DeCoster, Massey CEO Don Blankenship, and former BP head Tony Hayward are not only permitted to continue in business, but are enabled by the government to do so, under Obama no less than under Bush.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site