

Inspections of US egg farms reveal “stomach churning” conditions

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The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released findings Monday on inspections carried out in late August of the facilities of two egg companies at the center of a salmonella outbreak that has sickened thousands in the US in recent months. The companies have issued recalls of more than 550 million potentially contaminated eggs.

Inspectors found abominable conditions at Iowa farms operated by Quality Egg—parent company of Wright County Egg—and Hillandale Farms. Their findings included piles of manure, seeping manure, uncaged birds tracking manure, maggots and flies too numerous to count, and patently unsanitary work methods.

Neither company had adhered to a salmonella prevention plan. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that about 1,470 people in the US have been sickened by the Salmonella enteritidis (SE) bacteria in the latest outbreak (a figure likely underreported by a factor of as much as 40).

The Center for Science in the Public Interest called the FDA’s findings at the eggs farms “stomach churning.” The food advocacy group said that these companies operate with impunity because they expect no government oversight of their operations. “The decrepit conditions in these henhouses reflect the fact that companies know that FDA inspections are so rare,” the group noted in a statement.

According to Michael R. Taylor, deputy FDA commissioner for foods, the FDA had never previously inspected Wright County Egg or Hillandale Farms. And even in the face of growing evidence that the two giant egg producers were the likely source of salmonella outbreak, the FDA delayed action for weeks before finally pressuring the companies to issue recalls of the tainted eggs—Wright County on August 13 and

Hillandale on August 20. (See: “US agencies delayed action on tainted eggs for weeks”)

The inspections carried out by the FDA between August 12 and August 30 revealed “significant objectionable conditions,” according to the director of the FDA’s office of enforcement, David Elder. Such an assessment doesn’t begin to describe the deplorable conditions under which a basic food staple is being mass produced and then sold and fed to a public generally unaware of the dangers of consuming undercooked shell eggs.

At six Wright County Egg facilities the FDA found the following:

- Chicken manure in piles up to 8 feet high under egg-laying houses. “The outside access doors to the manure pits at these locations have been pushed out by the weight of the manure, leaving open access to wildlife or domesticated animals,” the report said.

- Non-chicken and wild birds inside the henhouses. These birds can introduce salmonella through their droppings. Inspectors observed, “non-chicken feathers” inside a henhouse; “Wildbirds were observed flying inside and outside”; “Pigeons were observed roosting in an air vent where the screening was damaged.”

- Numerous live rodents. The report also noted: “Unbaited, unscaled holes appearing to be rodent burrows located along the second floor baseboards.”

- Manure seeping through the foundation. “Dark liquid which appeared to be manure was observed seeping through the concrete foundation to the outside of the laying houses” at numerous locations, inspectors reported.

- Living and dead flies “too numerous to count” and living and dead maggots in the manure piles.

In relation to workplace methods at Wright County Egg, inspectors noted in particular: “You failed to take

steps to ensure there is no introduction or transfer of SE into or among poultry houses.” Employees moving from one hen house to another did not “wear or change protective clothing,” allowing the free transfer of salmonella.

In addition, chickens that had escaped their cages were tracking over piled manure to access the hen laying area, coming in contact with the egg laying birds.

Last week, FDA officials said that tests at Wright County Egg had found salmonella in bone meal and in feed given to young birds being raised to become egg-laying hens. During the recent inspection, bird nesting material was seen in part of the feed mill, including in ingredient storage and truck-loading areas. Inspectors also found holes in the bin containing meat and bone meal that had provided the source of the feed sample where the salmonella was found in the tests.

At Hillandale Farms, inspectors found many of the same issues, including:

- Gaps under doors, which could allow rodents and insects to enter the henhouses.
- Rodent burrows.
- Liquid manure seeping out of manure pits; standing water near manure pits.
- Incorrectly filled-out fly and rodent monitoring forms.

Laboratory tests on water used to wash eggs at Hillandale Farms also confirmed the presence of *Salmonella enteritidis*.

The FDA inspectors’ findings at both Wright County Egg and Hillandale Farms expose a prime environment for the spread of SE, which lives in animal intestines and is often present in animal feces. The rodents, wild birds, escaped hens, flies and other organisms can easily facilitate the spread of the bacterium.

Hens infected with salmonella then lay contaminated eggs. Humans consuming these undercooked shell eggs can suffer fever, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain. Those with compromised immune systems, as well as the elderly and infants, are at heightened risk for infection. If the bacterial infection enters the bloodstream it can be fatal.

About four fifths of the eggs consumed in the US come from about 600 major egg producing farms with 50,000 or more hens each. In response to the recall and subsequent inspections at Wright County and

Hillandale, the FDA has announced it will visit all of these major egg-producing facilities over the next 15 months.

Such inspections, however, will provide minimal protections against future outbreaks of salmonella poisoning, as the FDA lacks the resources and enforcement authority to properly protect the public, no matter what horrors their limited staffs may uncover. This is true not only in relation to the safety of shell eggs, but to food production as a whole, which is dominated in the US by giant corporations that value their bottom line above the health and safety of the population.

The FDA Food Safety and Modernization Act, passed by the US House in July 2009, would provide some increase in funding and authority to the agency, but is currently stalled in the Senate. Its provisions, in any event, would be inadequate to deal with a food safety crisis that has spiraled out of control in recent years—sickening thousands with tainted peanut butter, tomatoes, strawberries, lettuce, spinach, and now eggs.



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