

US egg producer responsible for outbreak knew of contamination for years

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Laboratory test records indicate that Wright County Egg, the company involved in the largest egg recall in US history, was aware of the presence of dangerous pathogens at its egg production facilities for years before a mass food poisoning outbreak across the US. Environmental samples taken at Wright County Egg facilities from 2008 to 2010 tested positive for salmonella 426 times.

The records, released Tuesday by the congressional Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, show that Salmonella Enteritidis was found in 73 of the 426 samples taken from egg conveyor belts and other areas of the company's barns.

This is the same strain of bacteria responsible for the sickening of untold thousands of people between May 1 and August 13, when the company announced a partial recall of eggs. Iowa-based Wright County Egg and the closely linked Hillandale Farms expanded the recall over the following week to encompass 550 million eggs sold throughout the country, becoming the largest egg recall in US history.

Some 1,500 cases of food poisoning over the period have been officially linked to the bacteria, although the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledges that the official count under-represents the actual scale of the outbreak by a factor of as much as 40.

Salmonella poisoning causes fever, vomiting, stomach pain, diarrhea, and can cause fatal blood infections and other life-threatening complications. Young and frail people are especially at risk of illness requiring hospitalization.

It may never be known how many people have been affected by the tainted eggs. The CDC estimates that the US population is subject to upwards of 80 million cases of food poisoning each year; some 300,000 of

these cases result in hospitalization, and at least 9,000 end in death.

Wright County Egg owner Austin "Jack" DeCoster is scheduled to testify before the congressional subcommittee September 21. A September 14 letter addressed to DeCoster signed by subcommittee chairmen Henry Waxman and Bart Stupak notes that Wright County Egg did not provide documents requested by Congress of its testing over the past few years, and specifically omitted records of the 73 positive Salmonella Enteritidis test results. Nor, the letter states, did the company "show whether Wright County Egg took appropriate steps to protect the public after receiving the positive test results."

The hearing will serve primarily as a means of damage control for the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the agency responsible for overseeing shell egg production in the US, and for lax governmental regulation over the food industry as a whole. Food producers are allowed to essentially self-enforce safety standards, and they are under no legal obligation to notify the FDA if self-monitoring for such dangers as salmonella contamination turn up positive results, let alone issue a public recall of potentially tainted products.

Nevertheless, records obtained by the subcommittee are further confirmation of the criminal disregard for basic health and safety standards. Records include 66 positive salmonella tests on May 27, 2010, and the confirmed presence of Salmonella Enteritidis on July 26, just three days before the California Department of Health warned the federal CDC and US Department of Agriculture of a suspected link between salmonella poisoning cases and Wright County Egg products.

Revealingly, in one case listed by the subcommittee, on August 4, a few days before the recall was

announced, Wright County Egg pursued additional testing on a sample, which confirmed the presence of Salmonella Enteritidis.

A week went by before the FDA suggested to the company that it initiate a voluntary, partial recall, and even longer before the agency warned the public of the dangers posed by eggs from the Iowa facilities.

Such actions—or inactions—are the norm rather than the exception in the US. Regulatory agencies have little enforcement capabilities over corporations, whether in food, drug, energy, banking, or other industries. Rather, federal agencies act more as rubber stamps for industry, delivering to corporations the guarantee of a consumer market.

Conditions inside the barns at Wright County Egg laid bare this state of affairs. Indeed, before high-profile inspections in late August, the FDA did not even have an inspection record of either Wright County Egg or Hillandale Farms for the entire history of the two companies' operations in Iowa. Inside the facilities inspectors found manure, teeming with maggots, standing 8 feet deep under egg-laying coops, wild birds flying into the henhouses through holes in the vents, rodent infestations, flies “too numerous to count,” and many other egregious violations.



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