

Producer of tainted eggs testifies before US Congress

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Austin “Jack” DeCoster, owner of the egg producer responsible for a mass outbreak of salmonella poisoning and the largest egg recall in US history, appeared before a congressional committee Wednesday and denied responsibility for the contamination.

DeCoster’s company, Iowa-based Wright County Egg, has been linked to numerous outbreaks over the past 30 years that have caused severe illness and death.

The hearings, held by the House Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, took testimony from DeCoster, his son Peter DeCoster, a federal Food and Drug Administration official, two survivors of salmonella poisoning, and a spokesperson for Hillandale Farms, another large Iowa egg farm with close ties to DeCoster that was also linked to the outbreak. Orland Bethel, the president of Hillandale Farms, invoked the Fifth Amendment to avoid testifying.

Salmonella poisoning causes fever, vomiting, stomach pain, diarrhea. Among the young or infirm it can cause fatal blood infections and other life-threatening complications. Between May and September of this year, some 1,600 cases of food poisoning have been officially linked to the tainted eggs, although the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the official count under-represents the scale of the outbreak by a factor of as much as 40.

The two companies, recalling between them more than 550 million eggs sold under 24 brand names nationwide, are likely responsible for the sickening of tens of thousands and unknown number of deaths.

The magnitude of this social disaster found no genuine acknowledgement either by the company officials or in the nature of the proceedings themselves. No criminal charges are pending against DeCoster, who presented himself as a pious and meek old farmer.

Reading prepared remarks, he told the committee, “We were horrified to learn that our eggs may have made people sick. We apologize to everyone who may have been sickened by eating our eggs.” He added, “I pray several times each day for all of them and for their improved

health.”

DeCoster is a multi-millionaire overseeing one of the largest egg producers in the country, with a long history of flouting food safety guidelines, labor regulations, and environmental laws. During the hearing, however, he sought to portray this history as a series of “mistakes” caused by inexperience.

“Over the years, we have grown to be pretty big in producing eggs,” he said. “Unfortunately, we got big quite a while before we stopped acting like we were small...we were big before we started adopting sophisticated procedures to be sure we met all of the government requirements. While we were big, but still acting like we were small, we got into trouble with government requirements several times.”

DeCoster’s presentation of the company’s record is outlandish. Over the past three decades, DeCoster has clashed with state regulators in Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Maryland, New York, and elsewhere. The squalid conditions at his farms have repeatedly been responsible for mass outbreaks of illness. In 1987, tainted eggs from one of his operations sickened 500 New York hospital patients. Nine people died from the food poisoning.

In fact, a *New York Times* review of public health records in the 1980s, published in a September 21 article (“An Iowa Egg Farmer and a History of Salmonella,” by William Neuman), found that DeCoster’s operations were “a primary source of salmonella enteritidis in the United States in the 1980s, when some of the first major outbreaks of human illness from the bacteria in eggs occurred.” New York and Maryland regulators considered DeCoster eggs such a threat to public health that their sale was banned in the states.

The *Times* noted that salmonella enteritidis was only a minor cause of illness until the late 1970s. In the US, the first salmonella epidemic broke out in 1979 in New England, where DeCoster was the largest egg producer. That same year, DeCoster sold that operation, based in Maine, to a separate entity, though he continued financing the business, and moved DeCoster Egg Farms to the state of Maryland.

The *Times* reports that the first salmonella enteritidis

outbreak to be recognized by public health officials occurred in 1982, at a nursing home in New Hampshire. Some three dozen people were sickened, and one person died from eating contaminated eggs that were traced back to DeCoster's Maine operation. At the same time, 400 Massachusetts residents fell ill from salmonella. A series of outbreaks followed over the next two decades.

This record underscores both the criminal negligence of DeCoster and the complete failure of the food safety system to protect the public. For example, after state-level regulators in Maryland in 1991 banned the sale of eggs regularly associated with contamination, DeCoster was found guilty in federal court of violating the embargo by selling the eggs to a local store. According to the *Times*, "Mr. DeCoster was given a suspended sentence of probation and a token fine." No action was taken by the federal Food and Drug Administration, which is responsible for overseeing shell egg production nationwide.

Just as the Maryland ban was lifted in 1992, DeCoster farm eggs caused another salmonella outbreak in Connecticut. This prompted state regulators to insist DeCoster decontaminate his facilities. In response, DeCoster simply moved operations to Iowa, where there were no state requirements for testing for salmonella, and continued in business under the new name Wright County Egg.

Again, the FDA did nothing to ensure the integrity of egg production, and in fact never even inspected a single Wright County Egg farm for the entirety of its operational history. When inspectors finally did investigate the facility following the August recall announcement, they found egregiously unsanitary conditions. (See: "Inspections of US egg farms reveal "stomach churning" conditions")

State officials warning of outbreaks have had no real enforcement capabilities over the company. Maine's state veterinarian Donald Hoenig commented to the *Times*, "The states were left on our own, with no federal oversight or guidance, to regulate this bug as best we could.... It has been one big 20-year experiment."

Both the company and the FDA are well aware of the rampant contamination problems at Wright County Egg. Records released last week by the congressional committee revealed that Wright County Egg was fully aware of the presence of dangerous pathogens at its egg production facilities for years before the outbreak. Environmental samples taken at the company's facilities from 2008 to 2010 tested positive for salmonella 426 times, including 73 instances of salmonella enteritidis. (See: "US egg producer responsible for outbreak knew of contamination for years")

Some of the positive test results were from water used to wash the eggs, conveyor belts, and other areas in direct contact with the eggs. Mice, flies, maggots, wild birds, and

other pests that were found infesting the facilities likely also spread the bacteria among the hens. Piles of manure eight feet high and piles of rotting chicken carcasses further contributed to the unsafe food production environment.

In additional testimony before the committee Wednesday, Peter DeCoster claimed that Wright County Egg employed aggressive preventive measures against salmonella enteritidis above and beyond federal protocols. He insisted that "a positive barn test does not mean that eggs being produced in that barn have SE [salmonella enteritidis]. A positive test from the environment is not the same as an egg positive test, for SE can exist in an environment—and in fact does exist in many places in the environment at large—without ever getting into our food supply." He suggested instead "the most likely root cause of contamination to be meat and bone meal that was an ingredient in our feed."

Revealing perhaps more than he intended, the younger DeCoster also declared that the bacteria "is a fact of life in the egg industry."

The committee released a "recognition of achievement" and a document awarding Wright County Egg a "superior" rating from AIB International, a private inspection firm. The rating was awarded in June 2010, at the height of the salmonella outbreak. The purpose of such bought certifications is purely to mislead the public about the quality and safety of the products. Significantly, the committee also released a similar document that AIB granted to the Blakely, Georgia Peanut Corporation of America plant that was the source of a mass food poisoning in 2008. That outbreak, which sickened hundreds and killed at least 8, came during the biggest food recall in US history. Subsequent inspections of the facility revealed dangerously filthy conditions. (See: "Nationwide salmonella outbreak forces major recall, plant closure")



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