

'Horrified' Egg Exec Apologizes For Salmonella Outbreak

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The owner of an Iowa egg company says in testimony prepared for a House hearing that he was "horrified" to learn that his eggs may have sickened as many as 1,600 people in an outbreak of salmonella poisoning this summer.

Austin "Jack" DeCoster and his son, Peter DeCoster, are scheduled to testify before a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee Wednesday. The panel has asked them to come prepared to explain what steps they have taken to address salmonella contamination found at their farms.

In testimony released by the company, Wright County Egg, the two men say they believe an ingredient sold to them by an outside supplier may be to blame for the outbreak.

So far, an FDA investigation appears to be focused on Wright and another company linked to the illnesses, Hillandale Farms. The two companies recalled more than a half billion eggs related to the outbreak in August.

Agency investigators found several samples of salmonella at the two farms, along with towers of manure and bug and rodent infestations. An investigation by the House subcommittee found that Wright County Egg had received hundreds of positive results for salmonella in the last two years, including 73 samples that were potentially positive for Salmonella Enteritidis, the strain responsible for the recent outbreak.

"We were horrified to learn that our eggs may have made people sick," Jack DeCoster said in the testimony. "We apologize to every one who may have been sickened by eating our eggs. I pray several times each day for all of them and for their improved health."

The president Hillandale Farms, Orland Bethel, will also testify at the hearing. Wright County Egg operates one of Hillandale's barns and supplies feed to the company.

Jack DeCoster is no stranger to tangling with the government. He has paid millions of dollars in state and federal fines over at least two decades for health, safety, immigration and environmental violations at his farms.

In the testimony, DeCoster says his companies, which span several states, grew too fast.

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

"We were big before we started adopting sophisticated procedures to be sure we met all of the government requirements," he said. "While we were big, but still acting like we were small, we got into trouble with government requirements several times."

Peter DeCoster, CEO of Wright, said the company has made "sweeping biosecurity and food safety changes" following the recall and will remove all of their flocks that have not been vaccinated against the strain of salmonella linked to the illnesses. Such vaccinations are not required by the government. On site inspections and testing will also increase, he said.

He also said the FDA inspected the company's feed mill in May and found no deficiencies. That is contrary to previous statements from the agency, which has said FDA has no inspectional history with the companies.

The specific cause of the outbreak is still unknown, and the FDA is still investigating.

No deaths have been reported due to the outbreak. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said this is the largest outbreak of this strain of salmonella since the start of the agency's surveillance of outbreaks in the late 1970s. For every case reported, there may be 30 that are unreported.

Source URL (retrieved on 04/19/2015 - 3:55am):

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