

Mich. Farmer Gets Prison for Bad Cider

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ELLSWORTH, Mich. (AP) — A northern Michigan man could spend up to four years in prison after improperly processed apple cider he made led to an E. coli outbreak and hospital stays for two adults and two children.

James Ruster is the first person convicted of a felony under Michigan's Food Law, according to state agriculture officials.

He pleaded guilty to willful misbranding and adulteration of food products and was sentenced earlier this week to 14 months to 48 months in prison.

Ruster, owner of Mitchell Hill Farm in Ellsworth, about 30 miles northwest of Traverse City, came under state scrutiny in 2011 when a food inspector with the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development learned his apple cider was being sold at a local farmers market.

His Antrim County farm had been previously licensed as a maple syrup producer but was not approved to produce cider, the state said in a release.

Ruster continued to make and sell cider even after repeatedly being informed that he wasn't meeting safe production standards. Inspectors said his cider equipment was unsanitary and had dried food on it.

In November 2012, state agriculture officials were notified of an E. coli outbreak associated with the cider. An investigation revealed four people were hospitalized and several others were sickened after drinking the cider.

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan urged people to avoid Ruster's cider.

"It's paramount that we maintain the safety of Michigan's food and agriculture products," said Jamie Clover Adams, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development director. "Mr. Ruster showed a blatant neglect for not only the safety of his food products, but the health of his customers. It's tragic that people were so greatly impacted by his willful disregard for food safety rules and regulations."

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