

Iowa Egg Company Charged For Salmonella Outbreak

RYAN J. FOLEY, Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — An Iowa company and two executives were charged Wednesday with selling the eggs responsible for a 2010 salmonella outbreak that sickened thousands of people and led to an unprecedented recall of 550 million eggs.

Disgraced egg industry titan Austin "Jack" DeCoster and his son Peter DeCoster were charged with introducing adulterated food into interstate commerce, a misdemeanor. A charging document filed in federal court in Iowa alleges the pair and their company sold shell eggs tainted with the strain of salmonella blamed in the monthslong outbreak of 2010.

Their company, Quality Egg LLC, which includes the DeCosters' network of chicken and egg-laying farms in Wright County in rural northern Iowa, is charged with introducing misbranded food into interstate commerce, a felony. The document says Quality Egg sold products from 2006 to 2010 with labeling that "made the eggs appear to be not as old as they actually were." The company is also charged with bribing a public official, a felony, for an alleged 2010 payment meant to influence a U.S. Department of Agriculture inspector to approve shell eggs that had been held back for failing to meet federal standards.

Attorneys representing the DeCosters and the company didn't immediately return messages. The charges were filed in a document known as an information, which means they waived their right to be indicted and are expected to plead guilty as part of a plea agreement. No court date was immediately set.

Seattle attorney Bill Marler, who represented some of the victims of the outbreak, praised prosecutors for bringing the charges.

"They are sending a pretty strong message to food manufacturers that if they ship — knowingly or not — contaminated food across state boundaries, they can be held criminally liable," he said. "That, to me, is a big deal."

The Food and Drug Administration Quality blamed Egg, which marketed itself as Wright County Egg, for selling the tainted products that led to the outbreak. Another Iowa egg company with ties to DeCoster's operations, Hillandale Farms, was also implicated. The companies recalled 550 million eggs in 2010 after public health officials found a sharp spike in reports of salmonella, which causes fever, cramps and diarrhea and can require hospitalization.

Scientists traced the illnesses back to shell eggs from those farms that were served in restaurants and sold in grocery stores under several brand names. FDA

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investigators found salmonella all over the farms, along with filthy conditions including dead chickens, insects, rodents and towers of manure.

The Centers for Disease Control says more than 1,900 reported illnesses were linked to the outbreak, the largest of this specific strain of salmonella since the start of the agency's surveillance of outbreaks in the late 1970s. The CDC estimates that it also caused as many as 60,000 unreported illnesses. No deaths were reported.

Jack DeCoster, 79, faced immediate criticism because of his long history of food safety, labor and environmental violations at his farms over the prior four decades. In congressional testimony, DeCoster said he was horrified to learn that his products sickened consumers and apologized. Peter DeCoster, 50, who managed the farms' daily operations, promised sweeping food safety changes.

Major companies including Wal-Mart subsequently abandoned their products and the DeCosters announced in 2011 that they were getting out of the industry and sold their operations in Maine, Ohio and Iowa.

A former manager at the egg farms, Tony Wasmund, was the first and only other person charged before Wednesday. He pleaded guilty in 2012 to conspiring to pay a \$300 bribe to a U.S. Department of Agriculture inspector assigned to Wright County Egg in April 2010.

Wasmund's attorney, Rick Kerger, confirmed Monday that Wasmund has been cooperating with prosecutors under a plea agreement that could allow him to receive a reduced sentence at his hearing in September.

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