

Egg company chiefs give Congress few answers

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press Writer Mary Clare Jalonick, Associated Press Writer – Wed Sep 22, 7:40 pm ET

WASHINGTON – The heads of two Iowa egg farms linked to as many as 1,600 salmonella illnesses this summer gave Congress few answers in testimony about the conditions at their farms Wednesday, as one executive would not testify and the other did not answer many of the lawmakers' questions.

The owner of Wright County Egg, Austin "Jack" DeCoster, said he was "horrified" to learn that his products might have been the cause of the illnesses. The CEO of Hillandale Farms, Orland Bethel, cited his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination and did not answer questions.

Hillandale Farms and Wright County Egg recalled a half-billion eggs in August after tests of products turned up potentially positive for the bacterium *Salmonella enteritidis*, the strain responsible for the recent outbreak. Wright County Egg supplies feed and chickens to Hillandale.

Before lawmakers called Bethel to testify, two witnesses recounted how they were sickened by tainted eggs. Sarah Lewis, 30, of Freedom, Calif., said she still has diarrhea, fevers and stress in spite of a trip to the intensive care unit and several weeks of sickness after eating a custard tart at her sister's graduation banquet. Her sister also contracted salmonella poisoning, she said.

"Knowing how sick we were scares the heck out of us now," Lewis said.

Carol Loboto, 77, of Littleton, Colo., teared up as she described a loss in stamina and constant indigestion.

The chairman of the House Energy and Commerce oversight and investigations subcommittee, Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., said the outbreak paints "a very disturbing picture of egg production in America."

Members of the subcommittee showed photos of dead chickens, insects and piles of manure in hen houses at the two farms.

A subcommittee investigation found that Wright County Egg had received hundreds of positive results for salmonella in the past two years, including 73 samples that were potentially positive for *Salmonella enteritidis*.

Although Bethel declined to testify, another Hillandale employee, Duane Mangskau, said the recall has forced the company to take a hard look at its operations.

After reading his prepared testimony, DeCoster, 75, had trouble answering some of the committee's questions, trailing off at times, speaking slowly and reading pieces of paper given to him by his lawyer. He told the committee that he was hard of hearing.

His son Peter, the company's CEO, took most of the questions, though committee members tried to get the older DeCoster to speak.

While acknowledging that conditions at the farm bother him "a lot," Jack DeCoster did not say much about the company's efforts to prevent salmonella contamination other than that his employees handle their duties "in a certain way."

"This is a complicated subject. I have to take it piece by piece," the elder DeCoster said.

Peter DeCoster tangled with Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., the chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, as Waxman asked about conditions at the farms. DeCoster took issue with Food and Drug Administration findings of filthy conditions at the farms, saying the agency's reports were only partially true. He said the company believes an ingredient purchased from a supplier may be to blame for the salmonella outbreak.

"It sounds like to me like both of you are refusing to take responsibility for a very poor facility," Waxman said. "For you to come before us and say, 'It's the feed, we have nothing to do with it,' is hard for me to believe and accept on face value."

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.

"We were horrified to learn that our eggs may have made people sick," DeCoster said in the statement he read to the subcommittee. "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."

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

Peter DeCoster 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 it has no inspectional history with the companies. The FDA's deputy commissioner, Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, said after the hearing that the agency has no records of that inspection.

Sharfstein urged Congress to pass food safety legislation that would give the agency more power to recall tainted products, require more inspections of food processing facilities and require producers to follow stricter standards for keeping food safe.

"We need this bill to protect the safety of the food supply," Sharfstein said. It will make a tremendous difference in FDA's ability to prevent future outbreaks."

The House passed the legislation last year, but it has stalled in the Senate where both parties are blaming each other for slowing its passage. Democrats have said they hope to bring it up, but Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., has said he will block its consideration because it isn't paid for.

Republicans say Democrats could get around Coburn's objections by voting to end debate on the bill, which would require 60 votes. The legislation has strong bipartisan support.

The partisan bickering in the Senate spilled over into the House hearing, where Rep. Michael Burgess, R-Texas, attempted to read a statement from Coburn denying he is responsible for blocking the bill. Stupak turned off his microphone.

The specific cause of the egg outbreak is still unknown, and the FDA is still investigating. Sharfstein said it is likely that widespread contamination at the farms caused the outbreak, and it is unlikely that it was just a feed ingredient, though the agency is not ruling anything out at this point.

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.