



Rotten Eggs Jack and Peter DeCoster Headed to Jail—Finally

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A couple of rotten eggs finally got their due. Well, sort of.

On June 27, 2016, Jack and Peter DeCoster, former owners of a Quality Egg Co. (not kidding), were ordered to begin serving time in jail.

The pair previously had been sentenced to three months each in jail for their role in a salmonella poisoning outbreak in 2010. The culprits admitted to knowingly shipping eggs with false processing and expiration dates to fool state regulators and retail customers about their age, and to bribing a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspector at least twice to approve sales of poor-quality eggs.

In sentencing the egg operators, U.S. District Judge Mark Bennett said, “Given the defendants’ careless oversight and repeated violations of safety standards, there is an increased likelihood that these offenses, or offenses like these, could happen again. The punishment will also serve to effectively deter against the marketing of unsafe foods and widespread harm to public health by similarly situated corporate officials and other executives in the industry.” A “litany of shameful conduct” occurred under the DeCosters’ “watch,” Judge Bennett told NBC News.

The Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal.

Predictably, industry groups like National Association of Manufacturers and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (whose products are central to factory farming) called the sentences “unfair.”

Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, told CBS News, “This sanction will slow business growth and innovation.”

But for consumers and honest egg producers, the sentences are both long overdue, and far too weak given Quality Egg’s history, which includes at least 10 deaths and 500 people made ill from salmonella-infected eggs produced by the DeCoster-owned egg operations.

Long Time Coming

The year was 1977. Neighbors who lived near Austin “Jack” DeCoster’s huge egg operation in Turner, Maine, began complaining about the lesser mealworm beetles (also known as guarno or litter beetles because of their affinity for manure) infesting their homes. They filed a \$5-million lawsuit, claiming, cynically, that nose plugs and flyswatters should be the “new neighbor” kit.

So began 33 years of labor, environmental, immigration, humane and food safety violations that never stuck to the “Teflon egg dons” until the 2010 salmonella outbreak for which they will finally serve time.

The 2010 salmonella outbreak for which the DeCosters will finally serve jail time and which triggered the largest egg recall in history, affected more than a half a billion DeCoster eggs. But it was only one of many DeCoster salmonella outbreaks.

As early as 1982, at least one person had died from DeCoster eggs. And in 1987, nine people died and 500 were sickened said authorities.

As is the case with most factory farmers, the DeCosters’ food safety issues were inextricably linked to abuse of workers, animals and the environment.

In 1980, the DeCoster operation was charged by the U.S. Labor department with employing five 11-year-olds and a 9-year-old.

In 1988, 100,000 DeCoster chickens were allowed to burn to death in a fire and left to decompose. (In 2010, 250,000 more DeCoster chickens were allowed to burn to death in a fire that required 225 firefighters. Thanks, taxpayers.)

In 1992, DeCoster was charged with indenturing migrant workers and denying them contact with teachers, social workers, doctors, lawyers and labor organizers.

In 1996, federal investigators found DeCoster workers living in rat- and cockroach-infested housing. The egg operation was fined \$3.6 million. It was also cited for improper asbestos removal. “The conditions in this migrant farm site are as dangerous and oppressive as any sweatshop we have seen,” said Labor Secretary Robert Reich at the time; “I thought I was going to faint and I was only there a few minutes,” said Cesar Britos, an attorney representing DeCoster workers, after entering a barn.

In 2001, dead DeCoster hens intermingled with live ones during truck transport sparked a complaint to the USDA.

DeCoster Raid Sickens Ag Officials

In 2009, state agriculture officials raided the same operation visited by Reich and Britos. They encountered ammonia fumes so noxious, four department workers had to be treated by doctors for burned lungs.

If people became sick from a short time visiting the barns, imagine working—or living in a battery cage—here.

The live hens rescued from the barns had to be euthanized, according to state veterinarian Don Hoenig, who said officials found conditions on the egg farm “deplorable, horrifying and upsetting.”

Consumers in Maine were shocked by the raid and the images. “Seeing how awful these hens look. there [sic] hair falling out, and green stuff coming out of there [sic] eyes and nose. Are the eggs safe even to eat? I wouldn’t think so,” read a post on the Sun Journal website.

After the raid, Quality Egg customers denied that they were associated with the company and few stores would admit receiving any of the 21 million eggs the company was known to ship each week. Retail supermarket chains Shaw’s and Hannaford both denied doing business with Quality, even though the Sun Journal found eggs from the raided farm, stamped “1183” or “1203,” at their stores. And Egglan’s Best, which maintained three dedicated barns on the Quality Egg grounds according to an undercover Mercy For Animals (MFA) employee, denied doing business with Quality Egg—even though an Egglan’s Best truck can be seen in the video of the raid!

Bob Leclerc, Quality Egg’s compliance manager at the time claimed no abuse was ever brought to his attention, though the MFA video shows workers and supervisors including son Jay DeCoster, being shown evidence of abuse. (An employee who was told there were live hens in trash cans he was emptying said “It don’t matter.”)

Despite a decades-long rap sheet, DeCoster expanded his egg empire into Iowa, Ohio and Maryland with the help of Boston public relations guru George Regan. The DeCosters even added hogs to the mix. And despite an Iowa ban against DeCoster starting or expanding his farms—he was a “habitual violator” of environmental laws, said the attorney general—he opened new farms with colleagues’ help, according to an Associated Press report.

A Host of Enablers

How did the DeCosters continue to operate their egg houses of horror for more than 30 years? Through shameless enabling by both federal and local regulators who serve industry, not consumers.

For example, documents before the 2010 salmonella outbreak charge a DeCoster manager with bribing a USDA inspector to approve sales of shell eggs that failed USDA standards. The manager pleaded guilty.

After the 2010 salmonella outbreak, DeCoster ignored a letter from federal lawmakers requesting information about “potentially positive Salmonella Enteritidis test results.” A second, shockingly polite letter from Rep. Bart Stupak (D-MI), chair at the time of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce said, “When you testify before the Committee we ask that you come prepared to explain why your facilities tested potentially positive for Salmonella Enteritidis contamination on so many occasions, what steps you took to address the contamination identified in these test results, and whether you shared these results with FDA or other federal or state food safety officials.”

Ask? Steps? The DeCosters did testify on the Hill. They defended their actions by claiming the business had just grown too quickly.

A three-month sentence for 33 years of food safety abuses as well as worker, animal and environmental abuses is also enabling. Recently a judge even granted the elder DeCoster's plea to go to a federal prison in New Hampshire so he could be near his family, "church" and doctors.

Like aging Nazis, the 83-year-old Jack DeCoster cries that he is suffering from ill health (coronary artery disease, prostate cancer and more) and wants to be treated with mercy he showed no one else.