MS Meat Plants Often Cited for Food Safety Violations

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — More than two dozen Mississippi slaughterhouses and poultry meat processing plants have violated sanitation or food safety guidelines over the past decade — and most did both, The Jackson Clarion-Ledger reports.

The newspaper [1] analyzed records from the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service database of enforcement action against federally inspected facilities. It says that 50 such facilities owned by 35 companies have racked up 69 violations resulting in 31 enforcement actions.

The largest total for any one company was 12 violations and five enforcement actions against Peco Foods of Tuscaloosa, Ala., which owns four slaughterhouses and a processing plant in Mississippi.

Most of those were the result of incomplete paperwork or documentation, and very few resulted from improper procedures, Curtis Stell, the company's director of quality assurance and food safety, wrote to the newspaper. "Peco is committed to meeting or exceeding the highest standards of food quality and safety performance," he said.

Records show that all were violations of sanitary or food safety laws and occurred between 2004 and 2007, the company responded to each within days and none closed a plant for clean-up.

The fact that more than six years have passed since the last "confirms Peco's continued dedication to food product safety," said Stell.

Five of the infractions occurred at its Sebastopol slaughterhouse, three at its Canton processing plant, two at its Canton slaughterhouse, and two at its Bay Springs slaughterhouse.

Mississippi's animal slaughter and processing industry employs nearly 17,000 people and has an economic impact of more than $1.7 billion, according to the latest figures available from the U.S. Census Bureau

Enslin & Son Packing Co. in Hattiesburg was the only plant where operation was suspended. That occurred after a July 2012 recall because Listeria bacteria were found in some products.

Plant Manager Freddie Enslin said operations halted for two weeks while workers scrubbed the facility.

"It's always a possibility that one of those things will sneak up on you if you're not

cautious," Enslin said. "We went like a shotgun and . got everything out of the plant and just sterilized the whole thing."

It was the only major enforcement action taken against the 90-year-old, family-owned business, which processes more than 2 tons of meat daily.

The federal database provides little detail about infractions, noting only the kind of enforcement action and the basis for it: Violation of the Sanitary Standard Operating Procedure (SSOP); Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP); Sanitation Performance Standards (SPS); Interference with Inspection (INT); or Inhumane Treatment of Animals (INH).

No Mississippi facility was cited for inspection interference or inhumane treatment of animals — including Southern Quality Meats of Pontotoc, where a worker was caught on an April 2 video mishandling pigs.

In a May report, the USDA OIG said inspectors didn't consistently write up violations and, when they did write them up, didn't distinguish between minor infractions and significant incidents. They also didn't take strong enough enforcement measures for repeat offenders, the report said.

Of the 39 enforcement actions taken against Mississippi facilities since 2003, all but one resulted in a warning letter giving three days to prove they had taken corrective measures. Each plant complied, avoiding stronger actions.

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