



The Meat and Dairy Industry



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Something Smells Fowl

TIME MAGAZINE

By RICHARD BEHAR AND MICHAEL KRAMER - Oct.
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The good news about chicken is that thanks to modern processing techniques, it costs only about a third of what it did two decades ago. The bad news is that an uncooked chicken has become one of the most dangerous items in the American home. At least 60% of U.S. poultry is contaminated with salmonella, campylobacter or other micro-organisms that spread throughout the birds from slaughter to packaging, a process that has sped up dramatically in the past 20 years. Each year at least 6.5 million and possibly as many as 80 million people get sick from chicken; the precise figure is unknown since most cases are never reported. Whatever that number, the conservative estimate is that bad chicken kills at least 1,000 people each year and costs several billion dollars annually in medical costs and lost productivity.

The man who made promises to clean up the U.S. poultry

business quit abruptly last week. The rotten system he leaves behind will be much more tenacious. **Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy** will leave office at the end of the year because he accepted too many goodies from the industry that he was supposed to be regulating. Among the items were \$1,300 worth of pro-football tickets, plane rides and lodging. Espy had reimbursed his benefactors, but recently another gift surfaced -- a \$1,200 scholarship Espy's girlfriend had accepted from a foundation controlled by Tyson Foods, the world's largest chicken processor. The White House had defended the former Mississippi Congressman for months, but the steady dribble of disclosures finally prompted the President to push him out. "I'm troubled by the appearance of some of these incidents," said Bill Clinton.

Bad appearances are especially painful when it comes to Clinton and the chicken industry. One reason is that Clinton relied on Tyson officials as a source of campaign funds while running for Arkansas' governorship and for the presidency. In his home state, Clinton gave the poultry industry special treatment, such as tolerating the pollution of the state's waterways with chicken waste products. In Washington the relationship is even more delicate because the Federal Government controls meat inspection. And Espy's ethical blindness is symptomatic of the cozy bond that has long existed between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and those it is charged with overseeing. By law, the department must promote agriculture and protect the public safety. In fact, the balance has always tilted toward the needs of industry rather than consumers, as Espy himself confirmed last year. In a private tape-recorded conversation in June 1993, the Secretary initially rejected the idea of warning labels on meat and poultry. Said Espy

after only four months on the job: *"Some consumer groups would like to tell people that this ((product)) may contain pathogens that could lead to so-and-so. We wouldn't do anything like that. We don't want to have a chilling effect on sales."*

It wasn't supposed to be like that. Clinton had promised reform. As President-elect, he set up a food-policy task force that recommended the start-up of a new federal agency responsible for food safety alone. Once Clinton was in office, however, the independent agency was never formally proposed. "And it likely never will be. There's just too much money at stake," says a senior Administration official.

As USDA chief, Espy at first resisted imposing a new set of poultry- inspection rules that would create a "zero tolerance" standard for the presence of fecal matter, which carries the organisms that make people sick. When Espy finally released an 86-page, zero-tolerance plan last July, it didn't contain a solution to the problem of dangerous bacteria. "The plan is a farce," says Edward Menning, director of the National Association of Federal Veterinarians, many of whose members work in poultry plants. "It's some spin doctor's effort to fool people."

As more people get sick from chicken, the debate has grown over who is responsible for ensuring that poultry is safe. According to a report by the General Accounting Office, "The inspection system is only marginally better than it was 87 years ago when it was first put in place." And yet, says Representative Edolphus Towns, who chairs the House Human Resources subcommittee, the USDA blithely continues "to stamp every piece of inspected poultry with a

seal of approval even if the product is crawling with deadly bacteria."

The poultry business, for its part, sounds a bit like the gun lobby: chickens don't kill people; cooks do. That is, fully cooked chicken is always safe. "Prepare the product properly," says Kenneth May, the industry trade association's chief scientist, "and there's no need to worry." Yet not everyone is a perfect chef, and not every kitchen is perfectly hygienic: everything that tainted raw chicken touches can be contaminated. As the system works now, says Gerald Kuester, a former USDA microbiologist, the "final product is no different than if you stuck it in the toilet and ate it."

Over the past few decades, the nation's poultry producers have capitalized on an epic change in America's eating habits. As cholesterol fears have mounted, the demand for chicken instead of beef has zoomed. **Since 1940, the number of chickens slaughtered annually in the U.S. has grown from 143 million to more than 7 billion.** By the mid 1970s, this trend posed a crisis for the poultry industry. Unless the industry was allowed unrestricted automation, supply could never meet demand. Under the regulations at that time, chickens moved slowly through the slaughtering process, and those birds noticeably contaminated with fecal matter were either trimmed or discarded altogether.

Everything changed in 1978. Based on a single study now considered flawed by independent experts, the Carter Administration's USDA allowed the poultry industry to wash rather than trim chickens and also to speed up the production lines. *"It was the worst decision I ever made,"* says Carol Tucker Foreman, then the official in charge of

food safety at the USDA. "They had that study, and I was convinced the consumer would benefit from lower-cost chicken." Many studies since then have shown that washing is ineffective, even after 40 rinses. (Trimming is still required for beef, "because the meat industry doesn't have poultry's clout," says a USDA official.) Simply put, the slaughtering process in which washing is the integral component merely removes the visible fecal matter while forcing harmful bacteria into the chicken's skin and body cavity -- and therefore out of the sight of inspectors who supposedly guarantee the product's wholesomeness. In a typical plant, three inspectors work a processing line, each examining 30 birds a minute, or one every two seconds.

The slaughtering process today further increases the likelihood of cross- contamination as dirty birds mingle with clean ones. If they haven't already become contaminated by the rapid defeathering and evisceration processes, which spread bacteria virtually everywhere, the birds lose almost any chance of emerging clean when thousands at a time bathe in the "chill tank" in order to lower their temperature prior to packing.

The industry has a good reason for resisting changes in this cold bath, known to critics as "**fecal soup**": the process allows chickens to become waterlogged. Regulations allow as much as 8% of a chicken's weight to be water, which consumers pay for as if it were meat. "When it comes to chicken," says Jack Leighty, a retired director of the USDA's pathology division, "water is big business." So big, in fact, that Tyson alone would lose about \$40 million in annual gross profits if the 8% rule were repealed. One study has shown that cross-contamination can be eliminated simply by placing the carcasses in sealed plastic bags

during the chilling stage. That measure, however, would halt water absorption.

Poor working conditions, too, have an impact on food quality. Antoinette Poole, 40, quit last month after working at a Tyson plant in Dardanelle, Arkansas, for five years. Her job: scooping up chicken breasts that fell off the processing line and onto the factory floor -- and rinsing them off with cold water. Poole claims she was so overworked that chicken parts sometimes sat on the floor for as long as half an hour. "Sometimes it stinks to high heaven, but who cares? Once it's frozen it ain't gonna smell bad. But I wouldn't want my family to eat that chicken," she says. If the chicken parts seemed bad, Poole was permitted to trim or condemn them. But "I got intimidated by supervisors if I threw too much into the condemned barrel," Poole says. "Supervisors get bonuses for saving as much chicken as possible. The USDA inspectors make their rounds, but they can't be two places at once. And we couldn't say anything to them or it would be our jobs."

Across the factory floor from where Poole used to work is Mearl Pipes, a 49-year-old sanitation employee who has toiled in the Tyson plant for nine years. This summer, at a meeting between employees and managers, says Pipes, "we asked why we're required to package chicken that smells bad, and they said the chicken can smell bad due to bacteria but it can still be of good quality. That's bull as far as I'm concerned." Tyson denies the charges of the workers, one of whom is a union organizer, but says an investigation will be launched. "I don't believe these practices are taking place," says spokesman Archie Schaffer. But if any of them are, "we want to know about it."

The American poultry-processing system looks even worse when compared with safeguards in other countries, especially in Europe, where governments impose much tougher inspections. The U.S. process is "*actually quite insane*," says Martin Weirup, who has overseen Sweden's successful salmonella-eradication program. "We have an entirely different process that begins with separating birds at the start of the process so the diseased ones, if there are any, are slaughtered last." European food safety begins on the farm, where sanitation is rigorously practiced. Says Willem Edel, a Dutch expert on salmonella: "You ((Americans)) don't really do anything there, so you're doomed from the start. The fact is, if you let birds come to the slaughterhouse infected, there is virtually nothing you can do. The Americans tell us privately that it's because of your industry's political influence." The social cost of infected chicken, argues Edel, is far higher than the price of imposing a cleaner system. "But industry has to care about those costs, or it has to be made to care about them."

When the Clinton team first took office, it indeed seemed to care. At a meeting on March 11, 1993, the industry offered its own proposal for a zero- tolerance poultry plan: a test for fecal material to take place after the chickens had passed through the chill tank. But USDA officials rejected this idea because the visible evidence of contamination would have been washed off. At the meeting, industry representatives grew angry and left the impression that they would protest -- which they may indeed have done. Several hours after that session, Tyson's lobbyist, Jack Williams, met with Espy in the Secretary's office, sources told TIME. A Tyson spokesman insists the zero- tolerance proposal was not discussed, but a USDA participant in the earlier session was later told to "destroy" everything he had regarding zero

tolerance for poultry. The plan then languished.

Several days later, Wilson Horne, then the USDA's chief of meat and poultry inspection, told his troops that a zero-tolerance program similar to the one already announced for beef would shortly follow for poultry. "The Secretary's chief of staff went crazy," says Horne. "He ordered everything out of the computer. He was emphatic that we were not to proceed or talk about poultry % matters. We thought there was a Tyson connection." The company denies any involvement.

A version of the zero-tolerance program finally surfaced last July, but it perpetuates the current, ineffective system because it is still based on visual inspection. It calls for all visible chicken feces to be washed away but doesn't deal with the invisible pathogens left behind. "All that would be inspected under this plan is the diligence of the washing procedure," says Rodney Leonard, who ran the USDA's inspection agency in the 1960s.

Even so, there are some hopeful signs. To Espy's credit, he reversed his earlier course and implemented the "safe handling" labels on poultry that the industry had fought for many years. Moreover, he appointed a new chief of the USDA's inspection service, Michael Taylor, a respected veteran of the tougher Food and Drug Administration. Taylor has already declared that a deadly E. coli pathogen found in beef is a product of the processing system rather than a naturally occurring bacterium. This new status means that producers can be held liable for food poisoning.

For 15 years, as the incidence of food-borne illnesses has steadily increased, the USDA has proved virtually

impervious to criticism. But microbes are changing all the time, becoming more virulent. "We must reduce the bacteria load as much as practically possible," says public-health expert Menning. "People are getting sick every day and dying. Most people can tolerate pathogenic exposure. The young and elderly cannot. There will be a massive food poisoning. And today an outbreak could affect so many people because of the concentration of industry." It will be up to the person Clinton appoints as Espy's successor to demonstrate whether safer food is a campaign promise on which the President can make good.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981629-1,00.html>

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