

AFFIDAVIT

My name is [REDACTED] I work as a poultry and red meat inspector for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS). I am submitting this affidavit freely and voluntarily to Alyssa Doom, who has identified herself to me as an investigator for the Government Accountability Project. I am doing so without any threats, inducements or coercion. I authorize the publication of this statement contingent upon the redaction of my name, and the name and specific location of the establishments to which I refer. This statement relates to my concern about the use of hazardous chemicals in poultry and beef processing.

I have worked for over 20 years at a processing plant in [REDACTED] where I am currently stationed. [REDACTED]. Because I have been with the plant for many years, I have witnessed several major changes take place. One of these changes has been an increase in the use of dangerous chemicals. I believe that the increase in use of chemicals in poultry and red meat processing has seriously impacted the health of numerous inspectors and plant workers, and I am concerned about the safety of the product for consumers.

When I first started working in the plant, half of which processes beef and the other half poultry, line speeds were much slower. About 12 years ago the FSIS implemented a new program called HACCP. This program created a new system for processing,

which was supposed to lead to safer food and put more responsibility on the industry. Before HACCP, inspectors' jobs were very hands-on. When the plant and Agency started using HAACP, many responsibilities were taken away from inspectors. We took on more of an oversight role. A new line was put in. We went from having two inspectors on the line to three, and speeds increased to the point that inspectors were examining 30 or more birds per minute each. It was after the company and Agency switched to HACCP that we began feeling side effects from the chemicals used in the plant.

The first warning sign that something was not right in the plant was when our hearts began to race for no apparent reason. Later, our noses would run and our eyes would burn. Now the range of health problems that those of us working in the plant experience includes asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia, sinus infections, heart palpitations, eye irritation, and dizziness.

The chemicals seem to affect both plant workers and inspectors. While inspectors can complain about the problem, the vulnerable employment status of plant workers makes it difficult for them to speak up. Instead they plead with us to help them.

I am extremely concerned about the health problems that many of the women working for the plant have been experiencing.

[REDACTED] works as a nurse at a local hospital and recently told me that many of the [REDACTED] women working at the plant came into the hospital experiencing abdominal problems all around the same

time. Once, a woman working for the company told me that 20 different women working for the plant had miscarriages. [REDACTED]. Also, a company worker was happy to inform me of her pregnancy and she also miscarried! The rate at which these women are experiencing miscarriages is not normal.

The extent to which the chemicals have affected us has varied at different intervals. For example, sometimes at the beginning of a shift we feel fine, but by the end of the day our eyes, nose, and throats are burning. At one point it was so miserable in the plant that some of the inspectors, including myself, began wearing gas masks. [REDACTED].

The IICs have never done anything to fix the problem. Some of the inspectors are afraid to speak up. Others have quit trying because their complaints have gone nowhere. Still, some of us have continued complaining to them for years, but the model continues to be "put up and shut up." If we complain, we become troublemakers. I have always been very vocal about my concerns with chemicals. One IIC told me that if I wanted the problem fixed I should do it myself. Of course, this IIC knew that I did not have the capacity to make any changes. Another IIC told us, "This is how all chicken plants are." If that is true, I think the Agency needs a major overhaul. In my opinion, most IICs just want to avoid rifts with the company management and the Agency.

At one point, we did have an IIC who took our complaints seriously. She had an entire stack of hazard reports and she sincerely wanted to get the problem fixed. Before she could do anything to help us, the company, with the help of some USDA inspectors, railroaded her out of the plant. I think that the Agency made things very difficult for her after she left [REDACTED]. It is a shame that she was reprimanded just for doing her job and doing it well.

[REDACTED] I decided that since I was out of the plant, I would see if I could get something done about the air quality. Every person that I tried to call at USDA directed me to someone else. I ended up calling five different people, but got nowhere. Trying to get this problem fixed seems like a losing battle.

I am not positive about the exact cause of our symptoms because as a line worker I am not allowed to know exactly which chemicals are being used in the plant. As inspectors, we all have our own theories, but I think there are a number of factors in play. To begin with, I think that sometimes the plant turns up the level of chlorine used in processing when they are experiencing higher levels of fecal contamination on birds. We used to test the chlorine levels so we could tell if they were too high, but the plant took away the chlorine monitors so we cannot run these tests anymore. Additionally, peracetic acid – which is another chemical used in poultry and red meat processing – as well as the chemicals

used to clean the floor act as major irritants. The combination of all the chemicals in the plant could be creating a substance that is toxic to breathe. Finally, I think that the building's poor ventilation system makes problems much worse.

[REDACTED], I have remained in close contact with some of the other inspectors. They continue to complain to the current IIC about the problems with chemicals. One inspector tells me that the IIC has a stack of complaints about air quality that is over an inch high. [REDACTED] after I leave the plant I have a tremendous amount of phlegm in my lungs, as well as sinus problems and headaches. If I go to work for just a day I become sick. It is obvious that the company has not fixed anything [REDACTED].

I am also concerned about the effects that the chemicals used in the plants will have on consumers who ingest the final product. The plant is literally bleaching chicken and beef. Once I asked my supervisor how anyone knows that this is safe for consumers. I was told that if it was not safe, the government would not be doing it. Still, I do not trust that the meat and poultry is safe because I know these chemicals seep into the product. Not only are chemicals leading to health problems among inspectors, but they could likely be harming consumers as well.

When I first began working for the government, I took an oath to serve the American public, and I had a great deal of pride in my work. Now I do not feel that I can accomplish this mission. I am no

longer proud of the work that I do. Instead I consider my time spent in the plant to be nothing more than a paycheck. When I first began my career as an inspector, I was praised for my quality work, received many awards, and was rated at the highest rating. I trained supervisors, new-hire inspectors, and offline inspectors as well. Now when I try to do my job, I am reprimanded. Things progressively became worse [REDACTED], another inspector who slept on the line was rated at the same level as me. In fact, this inspector was recently promoted. The rating system has become meaningless. [REDACTED]. The USDA told us, "it doesn't matter if you sign it or not." Those of us doing our jobs for the Agency are punished, and those who go against the Agency's regulations by helping out the company are rewarded.

In the time I have worked as an inspector, I have lost all respect for the USDA. Inspectors are not allowed to question anything and we are being prevented from actually doing our job, which is to protect consumers. There is no longer any accountability in the Agency, and I do not feel that I can trust the USDA after all they have done to me. I think that other inspectors have lost faith in them as well, and I know many who are afraid to speak up for fear the government will retaliate.

The other inspectors and I have always said it would take someone dying from exposure to chemicals to get the USDA to pay any attention. Recently an article about a USDA inspector that died

from exposure to chemicals came out in a major newspaper. It seems that maybe we were right because until now nobody has paid any attention to our complaints. My heart goes out to the family of this inspector who lost his life working in the plant, and I will continue to push this issue until changes are made. Although sometimes it feels hopeless, I am afraid many more people will become sick or even die if no action is taken.

I, [REDACTED], have reviewed this statement of 8 pages and hereby declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief. Dated this ___ day of May, 2013.

(Signature)

Sworn and subscribed before me this ___ day of May, 2013.

(Notary Signature)