THE CRUELEST CUTS

OBSERVER SPECIAL REPORT: First of Six Parts

The human cost of bringing poultry to your table

House of Raeford Farms masks injuries inside Carolinas plants

By Mark Huber, Alex Alexander

In an industry rife with danger, House of Raeford Farms depicts itself as a safe place to work. Company records suggest relatively few workers are injured each year as they lift, cut and package millions of chickens and turkeys.

But an Observer investigation shows the NC poultry plant has masked the extent of injuries behind its plant walls.

The company has compiled misleading injury reports and has dotted regulations as workers who were hurt on the job.

Company officials say they followed the law and notes to protect workers.

But experts say that’s inconceivable. MSDs, in- includes carpal tunnel syndrome, are the most common work-related injuries affecting poultry workers.

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The company has broken the law by failing to record injuries on government val.

INSIDE TODAY

2A | Editor Rick Thames: The most vulnerable workers.

1A | Carolyn's favorite poultry producers.

1A | Experts: Federal safety data misleading.

1A | Record-keeping chief: OSHA failing.

1A | How carpal tunnel syndrome happens and hurts.

ONLINE VIDEO

Scenes from inside a poultry plant; hear workers talk about their pain.

www.charlotte.com/poultry

POULTRY'S MARK: RUINED HANDS

A quarter-century ago, the introduction of a revolution- ary product: the Chicken McNugget. The bite-sized piece ignited demand for new poultry offerings. Now, dozens of specialty cuts—and hundreds of chicken and turkey products—are available to con-

sumers. The revolution has come with consequences.

In America's poultry plants, which rely increasingly on vulnerable Latino immigrants, workers' hands are more threatened than ever.

Karina Zorita knows little of this when she considered a poultry job four years ago.

IN THE BIG PICTURE, 15A

PHOTOS OF KARINA ZORITA: Jonathon Gile www.charlotteobserver.com

Poultry move down the line at House of Raeford's West Columbia, S.C., plant, where about 90 percent of workers are Latinos. Thousands of cutting motions per shift can leave workers’ hands in pain.

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Today we ask you to join in for a six-day binge on the Carolinas—America’s most popular meeting place. More than 28,000 of them in the Carolinas counties and towns in all its forms. Whole hams, fillings, fatback, collards, nectarines and sweet corns.

Mature gentlemen are often left to do the work of their less mature brethren. Should that matter as you consider the working conditions you fight to improve?

I say it’s because Carolina is to the north and music is to the south in our society. A great deal of coal country is the north and the music is to the south.

Talks halt between Burton, husky

Noisy production took place just before the dot was removed from the year, with the movie’s past glory nearly broken up with her nearly 30 years later — reminiscent.

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It’s also all the more reason to consider how much they’ve contributed.

Our journalists found evidence of abuses that has failed to report serious injuries, including broken bones and capsular tissue repairs. They described poultry workers’ complaints of abuse and treatment of workers.

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A poultry leader

Pain of poultry work is found near plants

Poultry plant locations

Housing of Raeford Form

The House of Raeford plant in West Columbia, S.C., processes 750,000 chickens a week. Chickens are de-feathered, gutted and conveyed to processing lines. About 95 processing plants are spread across the Carolinas, including seven House of Raeford plants.

Housing of Raeford says it looks out for employees in toy stores are more likely than poultry workers to develop musculoskeletal disorders. Government statistics show a decrease in the number of workers reporting injuries, but those who are injured are more likely to suffer from grueling, repetitive work such as cutting turkey “dinosaur” wings. It has grown from a backyard bird operation to one of the nation’s top poultry processors, helping make North Carolina the second-largest turkey producer. The company expanded by building two new plants since 1998 - a 150 million-pound turkey processing plant and a 100 million-pound chicken processing plant - with an estimated cost of about $220 million.

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Housing of Raeford is a privately held company located in Eastern North Carolina.

Processing plants: Four in North Carolina and one in South Carolina. The company accounts for about 10 percent of the nation’s poultry processing capacity.

Employees: About 7,000.

Annual sales: Nearly $2 billion, including exports to China, Argentina and other countries.

Ranking: It’s among the nation’s top 20 turkey and chicken producers.

Producers: Slaughters and processors about 225,000 pounds of chicken and turkey each week.

Customers:

- Restaurants including Wendy’s, Golden Corral and Hy-Dee.
- Schools throughout the U.S., including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.
- Stores including Harris Teeter, Food Lion and Lovin Fresh.
- The company’s food products are marketed under the name “Lakewood Foods.”

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Poultry say it

Company says

it strives for a

safe workplace

employees were provided to the Observer but de-

Inaccuracies” in the information worked-

ters said the plant manager was
ting employees to a doctor; but they often refused. “They’d say, ‘Belem,

Also, the company said it found “many
differentiation of hands are going to get to the point

where they have to go to a doctor. But we don’t help us at all,” she said.

By the summer of 2006, she said, “My

mother, Cruz took a job at the Green-


House of Raeford. Ten said they were

to properly record workplace injuries. Some examples:

During the past decade, regulators have cited more than 50 poultry plants for failing

Corticosteroids and other anti-inflamma-

tory medications. Sugar and vitamin

During the past decade, regulators have cited more than 50 poultry plants for failing

introduced the company to the dificult to

and arms hurt.

grabbing live birds before hanging them up-

side down on moving hooks that whisk

The company said it fired her because

Corticosteroids and other anti-inflamma-

Poultry plants are filled with hazards.

If House of Raeford’s records are ac-

company in recent years has failed to

attorney for the Cooperate Center for Work

injuries, they often refused. “They’d say, ‘Belem,

pany violated workplace safety law

how many of the workers’ specific

ment practices of House of Raeford

OSHA AND WORKPLACE INJURIES

brought in a cup of tea, which she

company officials said they fellow workers
tions in the area.

at the W est Columbia plant, which

and arms hurt.

Brek, a former OSHA policy

level, with an annual rate of

Gold’n Plump Poultry,

The company said it fired her because

whether companies are reporting

If House of Raeford’s records are ac-

company in recent years has failed to

OSHA monitors whether

7.7 Motor vehicle parts manufacturing

7.5 Furniture manufacturing

6.6 Poultry processing

6.0 All manufacturing

4.4 All private industry

4.4 Tool and die

2.4 Chemicals and soap manufacturing

2.0 Computer and electronic product

1.1 Services to retail trade

Safer than a toy store?

Workers safety experts also question a report on toy safety in the

injuries weren’t recorded

employees after a liquid

THE CRUELEST CUTS

Manager Mike Flow-

Ranch in 2003 to April 2007, according to the

FOOTNOTE (9)

Poultry are filled with hazards.

Employees were repeatedly ignored. A young


FOOTNOTE (4)

Ranch in 2003 to April 2007, according to the

Footnotes:

$10,000 poultry processors

20.8 Poultry processing

Footnotes:

27.5 Tires dealers

38.8 Average for all industries

29.5 Pharmacies

47.4 Hobby, toy and game stores

11.7 Motor vehicle parts manufacturing

2.0 Computer and electronic products

2.1 Services to retail trade

12.4 Chemicals and soap manufacturing
Company has history of fights with regulators

Poultry from USA work stations and other safety measures continue to low injury and illness rates, said McAleese. McAleese also said the plant recently spent $5 million for equipment that included a machine to remove cuts from chickens, eliminating the need for chicken butchery.

The officer added another explanation: “If they are very good with their hands and working with a knife, we’ve gotten lower claims.”

Asked to elaborate, McAleese said: “Instead, they’ve got very good environments for them.”

Toms Armstrong, a University of Michigan professor who has studied the prevalence of workplace injuries. “I think there’s absolutely no data to support that,” he said.

Armstrong said it’s unlikely a large poultry plant could go conscience-free years without a death. “It would be a shock to the system,” he said.

Company fights in court

House of Raeford has a history of unreported injuries. In 1997, union leaders at a plant in Raeford received complaints about workplace injuries, prompting investigations into the plant’s injury rates. The workers complained of work-related injuries that occurred from 1995 to 1997 and the rate of serious work health issues.

State regulators investigated and found that 21 of 25 complaints had been closed off with “plant intolerance to the low.” They could not confirm the injuries. The report also noted that the workers had left the plant and could be found.

Regulators and the violation as “wilful” — the highest category under OSHA rules — and recommended a $50,000 fine.

In 1997, the company was told by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in its plants.

In the Raeford plant, inspectors found that workers were suffering from repetitive strain injuries, regulators in 1999 began investigating. They spoke with all workers, many of whom complained of throbbing pain in their hands and shoulders and claimed that a third had been diagnosed with repetitive motion problems.

One of the inspectors, J. D. Lewis, recalls seeing young workers who could not use their arms or hands properly. One could still pick things up above his head, he recalled.

Inspectors were told to talk with more workers, but House of Raeford officials regularly told inspectors that they were being interviewed by a worker. Company officials said interviews were conducted so employees could not refuse to answer questions.

The case was sent to the Superior Court, where state Judge Jack Hooks ruled in late 2000 that the state had no authority to investigate for the company. His name: Compliance deadlines for a new federal occupational health standard had not yet

Still suffering

A year after the accident that shattered his middle finger, Gonzalez struggles to walk with crutches and said he is unable to work because of lingering pain.

Four house downs, Ernestina Ramírez, a House of Raeford sanitation worker, said she had found Vision for three days in 2006 after chlorine spilled into her eye. She now has a metal plate in her eye and can no longer work as a sanitation worker. She said she received Vision in a plant where she had been cleaning chickens.

A native of Vera Cruz, Mexico, Santiago said he is still dealing with the consequences of his accident. “I’m not seeing the light,” he said.

The company is being sued by the National Labor Relations Board.

Spanish version

Several cases of stocky’s poultry stories in Spanish, pick-up Wednesday’s edition of La Prensa.

Bob Whitmore, an OSHA workplace safety expert, spent a week examining House of Raeford safety records, national data and information that would disrupt the plant.

“OSHA has no data on what they are saying,” the Observer’s editorial board said. “It’s more like a natural movement for them.”

In July, Whitmore was placed on paid administrative leave after a confrontation with a company official.

The labor department did not find a company at Whitmore’s workplace using “tricky considerations.”

In the mid 1990s, some of the NaC labor leaders in Texas also began investigating the plant in Raeford.

Because House of Raeford reports some of the highest injury and illness rates in the nation, said he had been injured in the plant.

Inspectors filed an complaint alleging a third of 25 workers were suffering.

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The plant had been ordered to file an OSHA complaint alleging a third of 25 workers were suffering.

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