

Food for Thought: Jail Sentences Send Strong Message to Food Industry

April 15, 2015

United States of America v. Quality Eggs, LLC, et al., 99 F.Supp. 3d 920 (D. Iowa Apr. 14, (2015)



In April 2015, U.S. District Court Judge Mark Bennett in Sioux City, Iowa, sentenced Austin (Jack) DeCoster and his son Peter to three months in jail for their role in selling contaminated food across state lines. Their company, Quality Egg LLC, was sentenced to a \$6.8 million fine and placed on probation for three years. DeCoster and his son owned and operated Quality Egg LLC, which was once among the nation's biggest egg producers, but is no longer in business. Quality Egg LLC, Austin DeCoster, and Peter DeCoster pled guilty to misdemeanors last year. As part of the plea agreement, the individual defendants admitted to introducing or causing to introduce eggs that contained *Salmonella enteritidis* into interstate commerce. The plea agreements of the individuals state that they did not have any direct involvement in the sale of the contaminated eggs and that neither they nor their employees knew the eggs were contaminated. The company, on the other hand, admitted to giving a \$300 cash bribe to a USDA inspector in order to convince the inspector to release "red tagged" eggs into commerce. The company further admitted to selling contaminated and misbranded eggs that were sold with mislabeled processing and expiration dates. Finally, the company admitted to selling

eggs contaminated with salmonella. The sentences are noteworthy because the individuals pled guilty to strict liability crimes. Executives are rarely placed behind bars when found guilty of such crimes. To that end and as reasoning for the sentences, the U.S. District Judge mentioned at sentencing that "There's a litany of shameful conduct, in my view, that happened under their [Austin and Peter DeCoster's] watch." Prosecutors praised the jail sentences, noting that the sentences should send a strong message about the importance of following food safety rules. *Read more significant court decisions affecting the food industry in [Food for Thought: 2015 Litigation Annual Review](#).*

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