

The Charlotte Observer



THE CRUELEST CUTS

OBSERVER SPECIAL REPORT: *A six-part series*

The human cost of bringing poultry to your table



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

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

PART 1

Poultry giant has masked the **EXTENT OF INJURIES** in its plants.

PAGE 1XX

SPECIALTY CUTS put poultry workers' hands at greater risk.

PAGE 5XX

PART 2

MARVIN JOHNSON, House of Raeford chairman, has taken on regulators.

PAGE 7XX

PART 3

ONE BOSS'S VIEW: Pressure to produce came at expense of Latino workers.

PAGE 9XX

PART 4

COMPANY MEDICAL WORKERS sometimes make it hard for employees to get proper care.

PAGE 12XX

House of Raeford Farms masks injuries inside Carolinas plants

BY KERRY HALL, AMES ALEXANDER
AND FRANCO ORDOÑEZ
Staff Writers

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 kill, cut and package millions of chickens and turkeys.

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

The company has compiled misleading injury reports and has defied regulators as it satisfies a growing appetite for America's most popular meat. And employees say the company has ignored, intimidated or fired workers who were hurt on the job.

House of Raeford officials say they follow the law and strive to protect workers.

But company and government records and interviews with more than 120 current and former employees show:

- House of Raeford's 800-worker plant in West Columbia, S.C., reported no musculoskeletal disorders over four years. Experts say that's inconceivable. MSDs, including carpal tunnel syndrome, are the most common work-related injuries afflicting poultry workers.

- Its Greenville, S.C., plant has boasted of a five-year safety streak with no lost-time accidents. But the plant kept that streak alive by bringing injured employees back to the factory hours after surgery.

SEE POULTRY | 2XX

PART 5

Greenville, S.C., plant's **SAFETY STREAK** is a myth, current and former workers say.

PAGE 15XX

PART 6

LAX ENFORCEMENT of workplace standards allows dangerous conditions in poultry plants to persist.

PAGE 18XX

Reaction to poultry series

- Congressional leaders call for closer OSHA scrutiny, tougher penalties.
- N.C. governor seeks more money, staff to protect workers.
- Federal office to study underreporting of workplace injuries.

PAGE 21-22XX

Editor's column

Neglect of workers has ugly precedent in Carolinas history.

PAGE 26XX

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