



JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

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. The company says it has “programs in place to provide a safe and respectful work environment for all business associates. These programs adhere to government regulations and guidelines ...”

Pain of poultry work is found near plants

Poultry from 1XX

■ The company has broken the law by failing to record injuries on government safety logs, a top OSHA official says.

■ At four of the company's largest Carolinas plants, company first-aid attendants and supervisors have dismissed some workers' requests to see a doctor - even when they complained of debilitating pain.

Companies have a financial incentive to hide injuries. Ignoring them lowers costs associated with compensating injured workers for medical care and lost wages.

Also, the government rewards companies that report low injury rates by inspecting them less often. And regulators rarely check whether companies are reporting accurately.

Government statistics show a decade-long decline in injuries among poultry workers. Critics say the numbers are misleading. They point to one government measure showing that employees in toy stores are more likely than poultry workers to develop musculoskeletal disorders.

Experts say that's implausible; poultry workers routinely make more than 20,000 cutting motions a shift, and the work often leaves them with nerve and muscle damage.

House of Raeford and other poultry companies depend heavily on workers' hands to turn thousands of birds each day into convenient cuts for restaurants, stores and cafeterias. Companies increasingly rely on Latino immigrants, who are often reluctant to complain for fear of being fired or deported.

House of Raeford says it looks out for the safety of workers and treats them with respect.

“We come to work with five fingers and toes,” said company safety director Bill Lewis. “And we go home with the same thing we came in with.”

The newspaper asked one of the federal government's top record-keeping experts to review House of Raeford's safety logs and what injured workers told the Observer. Bob Whitmore, who has directed the national injury and illness record-keeping system for the U.S. Labor Department since 1988, said he believes his agency has failed to protect poultry workers.

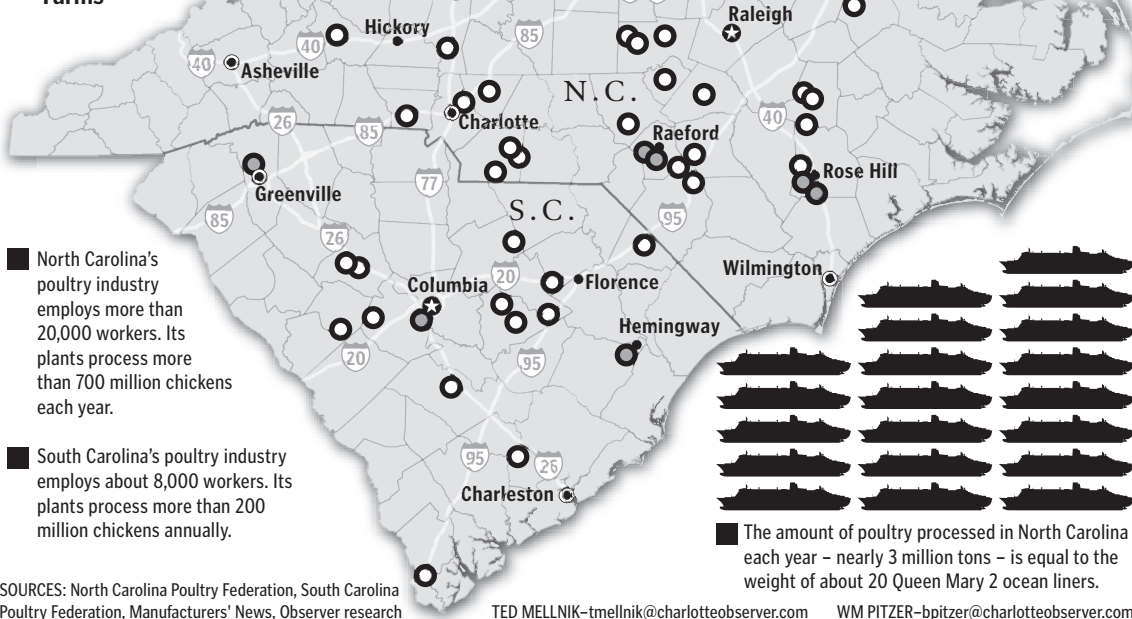
Whitmore was not authorized to comment for the government but said he felt compelled to speak on behalf of workers.

After reviewing the Observer's findings, he said, “This is violating the laws of human decency.”

A poultry leader

More than 80 percent of the nation's poultry is processed in the South. North Carolina ranks second in turkey processing, behind Minnesota, and fourth in chicken processing. About 50 processing plants are spread across the Carolinas, including seven House of Raeford plants.

- Poultry plant locations
- House of Raeford Farms

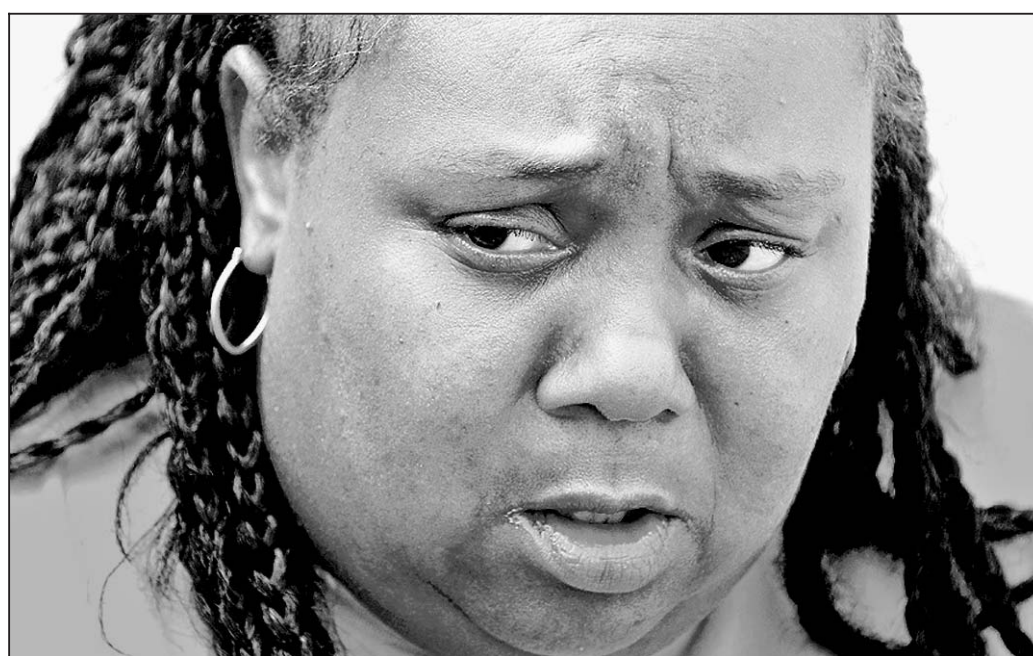


SOURCES: North Carolina Poultry Federation, South Carolina Poultry Federation, Manufacturers' News, Observer research

TED MELLNIK-tmellnik@charlotteobserver.com

WM PITZER-bpitzer@charlotteobserver.com

Claudette Outerbridge says her hands were injured at a House of Raeford plant in Raeford, where her job included cutting turkey gizzards. “I would go to work sick or I would go to work in pain, and they didn't care,” she says.



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Growth comes with cost

House of Raeford isn't a household name.

It has climbed from a backyard bird operation to one of the nation's top 10 poultry processors, helping make North Carolina the second-largest turkey producer. The company expanded turkey consumption beyond holiday dinner tables by creating new products, including deli-style breast meat and turkey “dinosaur” wings. It has grown by acquiring competitors and selling chicken parts overseas.

Its rise has come with a human cost. Workers have been maimed by machines and poisoned by toxic chemicals. Two were killed in accidents managers might have prevented. Even more suffer from grueling, repetitive work that can leave their hands wracked with

pain or missing fingers.

The company, based in Raeford in Eastern North Carolina, has been cited for 130 serious workplace safety violations since 2000 - among the most of any U.S. poultry company.

In communities surrounding House of Raeford plants, the pain of poultry work can be found in aging trailer parks and clusters of weathered rental houses where sheets cover windows for privacy. Knee-high rubber boots spattered with chicken fat rest on stoops.

In Raeford, about 100 miles east of Charlotte, former line worker Claudette Outerbridge lay awake nights because of pain pulsating in her right hand. The ache, she said, stemmed from her work, which included cutting thousands of turkey gizzards each day.

During her more than five years at the plant, Outerbridge held a variety of

jobs, including pulling out turkey guts and trimming parts. She said she moved from New York, where she worked as a police department clerk, and took a job at the plant in 1998.

She began visiting the first-aid station almost daily around 2002 to cope with the pain, she said. A first-aid attendant, she said, gave her a cream but performed no tests and refused her request to see a doctor.

She recalled times on the production line when her hand hurt so badly she dropped her scissors and cried.

“They'd say, ‘Oh, you're not hurting,’” Outerbridge said. “They made me feel that I was bothering them to go to the nurse, that I was supposed to take the pain.”

When she told a plant manager she needed medical help, “He sat me down and he said, ‘I'm sorry, there's nothing I

House of Raeford

Headquarters: The privately held company is based in Raeford in Eastern North Carolina.

Processing plants: Four in North Carolina, three in South Carolina and one in Louisiana.

Employees: About 6,000.

Annual sales: Nearly \$900 million, including some to China, Afghanistan and other countries.

Ranking: It's among the nation's top 10 chicken and turkey producers.

Production: Slaughters and processes about 29 million pounds of chicken and turkey each week.

Customers:

■ Restaurants including Blimpie, Golden Corral and Ryan's.

■ Schools around the U.S., including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

■ Stores including Food Lion and Lowes Foods. The company's deli meat is marketed under the name “Lake-wood Plantation.”

■ Distribution companies that supply food to restaurants and institutional kitchens.

SOURCES: Observer research, House of Raeford, Dun & Bradstreet, Watt Publishing, National Poultry and Food Distributors Association

can do about it,” recalled Outerbridge, now 48. “That day, I got a lawyer.”

In 2003, she went on her own to a doctor, who diagnosed her with severe carpal tunnel syndrome and later performed surgery, she said. She settled a workers' compensation case with the company the following year for an undisclosed sum.

“I just wanted justice,” she said. “I just wanted someone to take care of my hand.”

House of Raeford said it can't discuss Outerbridge's case because the settlement is confidential.

Human resources director Gene Shelnett said the privately held company considers its workers family. The company, he said, “would never allow anyone to mistreat anyone in the family. ... I believe we have provided the care for our employees that is expected.”

Current and former human resources employees at two House of Raeford plants said the company finds reasons to fire injured workers.

Belem Villegas, a former employment supervisor at the Greenville plant, SEE POULTRY | NEXT PAGE



Villegas

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CLAUDETTE OUTERBRIDGE, FORMER HOUSE OF RAEFORD EMPLOYEE