

THE CRUELEST CUTS *Second of Six Parts*

THE HUMAN COST OF BRINGING POULTRY TO YOUR TABLE

FIGHT AND MIGHT

Poultry company chairman defies regulators, watches pennies



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Marvin Johnson (right), chairman of the House of Raeford, received a lifetime achievement award (at right) at a poultry convention in Atlanta last year. He's with his grandson, Cowan, a manager of the company's plant in Wallace, N.C.

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Staff Writers

Hours after U.S. Department of Agriculture inspectors stopped production at his Greenville, S.C., chicken plant, Marvin Johnson got a top agency official on the phone.

"You are not going to walk over me. This is just bull---," Johnson told the district manager who had shut down the House of Raeford Farms plant in 1998, according to a signed court statement. "... I am personally coming after your God--- a--."

The USDA suspected that something in the air inside the processing plant was making onsite food inspectors sick. Johnson's company sued the agency in federal court to get the plant reopened. Less than two weeks after the shutdown, and after managers made some adjustments, a judge ruled in the company's favor and put the plant back in business.

More than anyone else, the 81-year-old Johnson is responsible

for transforming N.C.-based House of Raeford from a home-grown operation into one of the nation's leading poultry companies. Along the way, he has repeatedly sparred with government regulators – from state elections officials to workplace safety inspectors.

Industry leaders call Johnson an innovator. His company was one of the first to sell deli-style turkey breast meat. Last year, he was honored with a lifetime achievement award from the National Poultry & Food Distributors Association, joining other industry giants including Frank Perdue and Col. Harland Sanders.

Records and interviews, however, show his company has masked the extent of injuries inside its plants, and has repeatedly run afoul of safety regulators. House of Raeford has been cited for 130 serious workplace safety violations since 2000 – among

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