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Will rebuild poultry business

PCB-hit farmer may sue U.S.

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Paul Woodward says he'd never even heard of PCBs when the government one day in August asked him to kill every last one of his 500,000 chickens.

Now he's preparing to start the long grind of rebuilding the business with 40,000 2 week old pullets, and he's thinking about suing the government.

The 57-year-old poultry farmer said in a telephone interview from Franklin on Saturday that he and his partners lost about $1 million because cancer-causing PCBs leaked into the farm's chicken feed.

Woodward does not totally blame the source of the contamination, Pierce Packing Co., Billings, Mont. It's the federal government he's most steamed about.

Woodward said he, his brother, Marlow, and Ramon Wright — partners for 13 years in the devastated Ritewood Egg Co. — are thinking of taking the government to court to help cover the loss.

"One way or another we need to recover close to a million dollars," Woodward said. "Pierce has liability, but it won't go over a tenth of what they're liable for.

"We went up to see Pierce's last week and they're going to work with us."

Woodward said he's skeptical about how successful a suit against the government would be, but he feared that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration doubted Ritewood's loss by being slow to detect the PCBs.

"If we've got to go through all the lawsuits — 15 or 20 lawsuits — by the time you pay the attorneys you have nothing left."

Woodward said he and his partners would "much rather" sue the government than Pierce Packing. The PCBs, used as a coolant in electrical transformers, accidentally leaked into chicken and hog feed produced at the Montana plant.

Shipments of the tainted feed have been traced to 17 Western and Midwestern states, and millions of eggs were sold before the contamination was discovered.

"The government went 40 days after taking a sample on the birds when they told us our chickens were contaminated. If they would have done the tests as they should have, we could have saved half our chickens."

It was revealed 2 weeks ago that a sample of tainted Ritewood eggs was left in a refrigerator for 10 days while an FDA inspector went on vacation. Further examples of bureaucratic slowness in the detection process brought sharp criticism from Gov. Evans and members of the U.S. House Oversights and Investigations Subcommittee.

Woodward said he supervised the destruction of the final batch of contaminated chickens Friday. He said the previously released figure of 350,000 was low — when all the birds were counted the total was 500,000.

"We have one bunch more of little ones that didn't get any contaminated feed. That's where we're at now.

"We're getting back in the business, I hope. It will take us a year to be anywhere built back up.

"If we don't get sued and we have a good banker, we'll get back into business."

Woodward has been in the chicken-and-egg business since 1957. He joined forces with his brother and Wright in 1966.

"It's been a good business financially. We've saved ourselves and haven't been on the crazy side. We haven't liked to get too far in debt."

Ritewood has insurance, he said, "but nothing to cover something like this PCB thing."

"I never heard of PCB before until we got the word our chickens were bad.

"I can't imagine that the eggs are that bad. I think it's a government overreaction. They haven't been near that crazy about cancer causing cigarettes."

No PCB found in pork of Twin Falls packer

TWIN FALLS (UPI) — Preliminary tests indicate that pork processed recently by Independent Meat Co., Twin Falls, does not contain toxic PCBs, federal officials said.

Dr. M.C. McNay, deputy regional director of the U.S. Agriculture Department, said there were no traces of the cancer-causing chemical in samples of ham and bacon tested in San Francisco.

More tests are scheduled over the next few days, McNay said.

Independent Meat markets its products under the Falls Brand label.

Some grocery chains have stopped selling Falls Brand meats while Independent is suspected of having contaminated meat.

McNay said all other supermarkets carrying Falls Brand products have been asked to remove the meats from their shelves while the remaining tests are completed.

Independent purchased 80 hogs from Ambrose Farms of Wendell, which had bought 40,680 pounds of feed from Pierce Packing Co., Billings, Mont.

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