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## **Congress takes on poultry industry**

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The Charlotte Observer

Hearings called after newspaper put spotlight on worker safety

U.S. Senate and House committees, spurred by an Observer report on N.C. poultry giant House of Raeford Farms, are planning hearings on worker safety in the poultry industry, congressional leaders and aides said.

"All Americans should be horrified at the conditions reported in this investigation," Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, said in an e-mail. He said he plans to hold a hearing this spring.

In a six-part series that began last Sunday, the Observer reported that House of Raeford, which has seven processing plants in the Carolinas, had masked the extent of injuries behind its plant walls.

Employees say the company, which has plants in West Columbia, Greenville and Hemingway, has ignored, intimidated or fired workers who were hurt on the job.

Among the Observer's findings were that the company has broken the law by failing to record injuries on government safety logs and that seriously injured workers were brought back to the company's Greenville plant hours after medical procedures.

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

On Friday, an official with the S.C. Workers' Compensation Commission said his agency will conduct a review to determine whether the company is properly reporting injuries and providing medical treatment for workers hurt on the job.

"The issues raised in your series are very serious ones," said Gary Thibault, the commission's executive director. "... Anyone who needs medical attention should be getting medical attention. And all claims should be reported and filed with the commission."

The Observer found that company first-aid attendants and supervisors have dismissed some workers' requests to see a doctor — even when they complained of debilitating pain.

"It's unacceptable that in 21st-century America any employees are subjected to inhumane and dangerous work conditions," Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., chairman of the Senate committee on Health Labor Education and Pensions said in an e-mail.

Kennedy's committee plans to discuss worker safety in manufacturing, including the poultry industry, in a full-committee meeting in late April and a subcommittee meeting earlier in the month, a Senate staffer said this week.

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., said he will contact the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration about how the House of Raeford plant in West Columbia was able to report no musculoskeletal injuries over a four-year period.

"That really sounds very odd, given industry averages," Inglis said. "You got to wonder how that happened."

Inglis also said the Observer's findings illustrate the need for a comprehensive U.S. immigration policy.

Several workers coming home from their shift along a wooded path near the company's Greenville plant on Thursday said there is growing concern that immigration agents may raid the plant.

They said plant officials brought several immigrant workers into offices and questioned them about their identification this month.

The company didn't respond to questions Friday. The Observer series was based on examinations of government and company records and interviews with more than 120 current and former House of Raeford workers.

In the response on its Web site, the company said, "This article does not provide an accurate portrayal of the programs, policies and practices of our company or the poultry industry. We are disappointed that the newspaper

chose to highlight allegations of a small number of former employees, many of whose cases we identified as factually incomplete or inaccurate.”

The Observer found that state and federal OSHA agencies are no longer keeping a close watch on the poultry industry. Workplace safety inspections at U.S. poultry plants have dropped to their lowest point in 15 years. And it has been nearly a decade since OSHA fined a poultry processor for hazards likely to cause carpal tunnel syndrome, tendinitis and other musculoskeletal disorders that are common to the industry.

Industry leaders have said poultry companies are contributing to safety efforts.

“The chicken industry is playing a responsible leadership role in improving worker safety in its workplaces and reducing the incidence of injuries and health problems such as conditions associated with repetitive motion,” National Chicken Council spokesman Richard Lobb said in an e-mail last month, pointing to U.S. Labor Department surveys that have shown a steady decline since 2000 in reported poultry work injuries. He had no further comment Saturday.

Critics say those numbers are misleading, that companies often ignore and underreport the injuries workers do complain about.

“I don’t think the problems are limited to House of Raeford or the poultry industry or North Carolina,” said AFL-CIO safety director Peg Seminario.