

When I first started practicing law back in 1988, I worked as an associate attorney for a well established insurance defense law firm. I stayed at that firm for about 7 years before leaving to start my own practice, representing injured workers.

My days as an insurance defense lawyer were invaluable, however, because I learned a great deal about workers' comp. law from some very good lawyers and I litigated hundreds of cases. I also traveled throughout the state and got to see numerous job sites in person.

I remember distinctly visiting several poultry processing plants north of Atlanta near Gainesville. I will never forget watching poultry workers "popping blisters" on conveyor lines of chickens moving quickly overhead.

It is no surprise that poultry plant workers experience a high number of work injuries. The most obvious type of injuries are repetitive motion injuries such as carpal tunnel, but I also see shoulder injuries, crush injuries and puncture wounds.

Now, I am reading that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed a rule change that will reduce federal oversight of poultry processing plants while allowing processors to speed up their kill lines. Currently USDA regulations required processors to allow four inspectors per line with the lines producing 140 chickens per minute. The new regulations would only call for three inspectors per line, while allowing the lines to turn 25% faster - 175 birds per minute.

The federal government will save \$90 over three years by eliminating the fourth inspector. At the same time, large processing companies will save over \$250 million by increasing the speed of the lines.

The government claims that food safety would be enhanced by these new rules by redirecting the tasks of the remaining inspectors and by requiring the poultry producers to take responsibility for more inspection tasks. That, of course, remains to be seen. However, it seems very likely to me that speeding up the lines will result in more work injuries.

A faster line will necessitate more repetitive motion, and a faster line will also dull the cutting knives that workers use to process the meat. Dull knives will not cut bone and meat as quickly thus requiring the worker to use more pressure to cut through the chicken. Faster line speeds will also increase the likelihood of cuts and puncture wounds, and I expect that floors will become slippier, resulting in more falls and back injuries.

I can also tell you that poultry processing companies usually take a hard line on plant worker claims - perhaps because worker injuries in poultry plants occur at a high frequency. The physicians on their posted panels get most or all of their business from the plant so they tend to minimize the seriousness of and long term impact of injuries.

I understand that in tough economic times it can be difficult for a poultry plant worker to want to take on his employer when his or her wrist and shoulders ache. Unfortunately repetitive motion injuries rarely get better on their own and waiting to find out more about filing a claim can make it more difficult to recover the benefits due under the law. If you or a loved one think that you

may have a claim for an injury suffered at a poultry plant I encourage you to contact me by phone or email. I will give you a fair assessment of your possible claim and answer questions you may have.