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Contact: Aidan O'Shea
aoshea@publicjustice.net, (202) 861-5240

Peter Hart
phart@fwwatch.org, (732) 266-4932

Smithfield Lied to the Public at the Expense of Workers' Lives, New LawsUIT Alleges

*Advocacy Group Sues Smithfield for Deceiving Consumers
About Protecting Workers and Looming Meat Shortages*

Today, Food & Water Watch, represented by Public Justice, filed a lawsuit in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia against Smithfield Foods, alleging that the multinational meat processing company repeatedly lied to consumers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic so it could protect its bottom line—at the expense of its workers' lives.

Throughout the pandemic, Smithfield mounted an aggressive public relations campaign based on two claims: that the company was protecting workers at its facilities from COVID-19, and that meat shortages were coming if processing plants were forced to close. Today's lawsuit alleges that both claims were lies.

"Corporations like Smithfield routinely choose profit over people. The company utterly failed to protect its workers as the coronavirus spread like wildfire throughout its meat processing facilities, and its fearmongering about meat shortages was designed to exploit consumer panic and boost sales. Smithfield put workers' lives at risk all in the name of corporate greed and turned already notoriously dangerous workplaces into deadly ones," said **Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director of Food & Water Watch**, the advocacy organization bringing the case on behalf of consumers and the general public.

COVID-19 laid bare the industry's chronic worker abuse. Throughout the crisis, meatpacking workers, who are [mostly people of color](#), have been experiencing massive COVID-19 outbreaks in their communities. More than [58,000 meatpacking workers have contracted COVID-19](#), and 293 have died.

"Smithfield led a coordinated campaign to tell consumers it was protecting workers—but in reality, it wasn't. Smithfield also scared consumers into thinking national meat shortages were near—but that wasn't true either. District of Columbia consumers have a right to truthful information and they should hold companies accountable when they lie to protect their business and brand— especially when those lies come at the enormous expense of workers' lives," said **Randy Chen, Staff Attorney at Public Justice**, who is part of the legal team in this lawsuit.

To assuage consumer concerns about worker safety, Smithfield said that it was aggressively protecting meatpacking workers. Through advertisements, social media, and website

disclosures, the company claimed it was implementing a host of measures to protect workers from COVID-19—including providing personal protective equipment, relaxing leave policies, and partnering with state and local health departments.

In reality, these statements were not true. Workers were in fact gravely endangered, and Smithfield slaughterhouses repeatedly emerged as epicenters for COVID-19 outbreaks. Over 3,200 Smithfield employees have contracted COVID-19. According to both workers and government safety regulators, Smithfield was not providing the safety measures it had promised. Smithfield even undermined the efforts of government officials to protect worker safety by failing to report COVID-19 cases among its workforce and stonewalling efforts to keep workers safe.

In addition, Smithfield stoked consumer fear about an impending national meat shortage. This had the effect of driving up demand for Smithfield's products, as panicked consumers rushed grocery stores to stockpile meat.

But this too was misleading, because meat shortages were never on the horizon. Quite the opposite: while Smithfield was telling Americans that the sky was falling, it was dramatically increasing its foreign pork exports to record high levels. Billions of pounds of meat were held in freezer warehouses throughout the country – more than enough meat to keep grocery stores stocked for months even if production were to drop off.

A copy of the lawsuit filed today is available [here](#).

The Public Justice Food Project is the only legal project in the country that is focused solely on dismantling the structures that enable the consolidation of corporate power and extractive practices in our food system and supporting a vision of animal agriculture that is regenerative, humane, and owned by independent farmers.

Food & Water Watch mobilizes people to build political power to move bold and uncompromised solutions to the most pressing food, water and climate problems of our time. We use grassroots organizing, public education, research, policy analysis, and litigation to protect people's health, communities and democracy from the growing destructive power of powerful economic interests.