

The story you are about to read is true. The names have not been changed to protect the innocent. No one is innocent. Everyone involved was guilty of at least one major crime.

My name is Saturday. Joe Saturday. I carry a hive tool.

Thursday, 10:14 am - My partner and I were working the day watch on the biosecurity desk when a messenger delivered a video tape.

"We've got problems with honey in Australia," he said, tossing the tape onto my desk.

"Not our problem," I said. "Not our beat. Look at a map. No, that's a U.S. map.

Find a globe.

"Way, way out of our jurisdiction" said my partner, awaking from his apparent coma. "Hard to think of a place further from here than there."

"Yes," I said as I picked up the tape, "This case is Guam, but not forgotten.

Here today, gone to Maui."

"But the honey wasn't Australian" said the messenger, "It was imported."

"Australia importing honey?" said my partner. "That does sound unusual."

"The Honey was from Argentina." said the messenger.

"Sounds like a 147-14.05-c to me" offered my partner. "Dumping without a permit."

"Maybe," I said. "What else do you know? Just the facts, man."

"Well," the messenger said, "the antibiotic 'nitrofurantoin' was first found by Australia, first in imported prawns, and then in imported honey."

"Pawns?" interjected my partner. "You need the Chess Patrol - this is the Beekeeping SWAT Team."

"Not pawns, PRAWNS," I answered. "Large shrimp."

"Large shrimp?" asked my partner. "Should we call in the Oxymoron Squad?"

"Prawns are bigger than jumbo shrimp..." I replied. "...never mind, forget it."

"Let's play the tape."

The tape was a mystery from the start. It was a segment from an Australian TV news program called "Today/Tonight." We thought this was a clue that the program was broadcast from either Antarctica or the North Pole, but we soon realized that some journalists just don't know night from day.

The story ran 20 minutes long. It told a tale that made us all squirm in our seats, made our stomachs turn over, our heads swim, and our eyes cross. The reputation of honey was being slowly roasted and we started to get dizzy from imagining innocent Australian beekeepers slowly turning over the hot coals of "investigative journalism." My partner pulled a tendon from all this physical effort, and left to search the local bars for medication.

"Kid," I said to the messenger. "You want to make detective, don't you?"

"Sure" said the kid. "I want to carry a gold-plated hive tool like yours, someday."

"Then pay attention" I said. "The real crime here was not the contaminated honey, but how everyone reacted to the problem."

"You mean they committed a 205-19.6?" asked the kid.

"Bright boy." I said. "Yes, it was multiple counts of 'Willful Disregard Of The Obvious.' A felony in this state.

They will all pay the price for their crimes, but maybe you can learn from this how not to handle a similar situation if it

happens on your beat.

Look at my notes, and pick out the top ten..."

"Like Letterman?" The kid interrupted.

"No, like the FBI Most Wanted List," I said. "This time, a food scare hit Australian honey, but don't worry, it can happen here, and it will happen again. And again."

"You mean like the Mad Cow from Washington State?" asked the kid.

"Yes, just like that." I said. "But my beef with that case was that the cow was Canadian."

"So the beef was 'Grade A,' Eh?" asked the kid, but I saw that one coming. I picked up a book. I threw the book at him.

I sat back with a cold bottle of mineral water and opened up another evidence file while the kid read my notes, re-screened parts of the tape, and typed up the report. He did OK, but he plays with rewind and fast forward too much.

He handed me this:

THE TOP TEN FELONIES LIST

1) THE REGULATORS

When one of the largest beekeepers in the country comes back from a conference, and tells a government agency with "Quarantine" and "Inspection" in its name (AQIS) that honey imported from a certain country was testing as contaminated elsewhere, the agency should not ignore his report. They should get busy doing some inspecting and quarantines. They could at least send a few e-mails and make a few phone calls to verify the beekeeper's report, no matter what they thought of the claim.

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This Story Is
True. Recalls Are
Cheaper Than
Bad Press

James Fischer

2) THE PUBLIC

When a TV show ran "scare" stories on the antibiotic "nitrofurans," first in imported prawns, and then in imported honey, people took these reports at face value, even though not much was explained about the tests used to detect the contamination. Regardless of the facts, if a story makes TV or a major newspaper, it is a serious problem, even if it is not a major health or technical issue. If the reporters call it a "major scandal" (and they did), then it is.

At least the TV report made it clear that the contamination was limited to honey that was blended with honey imported from Argentina. All in all, the reporting has to be described as more or less "responsible." Rare! It could have been much worse.

3) A SCIENTIST'S 15 MINUTES OF FAME

Even if we don't like the idea of sensational "scare" reporting, we really can't be too hard on the reporters. They did nothing but quote Dr. Geoff Skurray, a Professor of Food Science at the University of Western Sydney, who was both quoted and paraphrased in their Prawn's story:

"Only a minute amount of nitrofurans can cause cancer. We're talking about one part per billion that can cause cancer over a period of time.' The Professor says eating three or four of the contaminated prawns over a period of time could be enough to cause the disease."

But no one asked any other scientist or doctor about his clearly questionable statements. If "3 or 4 prawns" can cause cancer at one part per billion (ppb) of contamination, then what are people to think about a jar of honey contaminated at 0.5 parts per billion?

4) THE PACKER/IMPORTER

Capilano Honey's general manager, Roger Masters, appeared on Australian TV, and said that his company's honey was not contaminated with nitrofurans, only to be contradicted by tests of his company's honey taken from store shelves. Bad move. I hope he has a generous severance package in his employment contract.

He's likely a fatality in this train wreck of public relations errors.

5) THE PACKER/IMPORTER, AGAIN

Even worse, Capilano Honey made threats of legal action against Warren Tyler, the *beekeeper* who told the press about the contamination when AQIS failed to act on his report. A very, very bad move. Suddenly, the situation ratcheted up from "bureaucratic inaction," which is not really news to anyone, to "cover up," which >>is<< news. If not for the legal threats, the story might not have appeared on TV at all.

6) THE APPEARANCE OF "SCIENCE," BUT 100% FACT-FREE

Random samples were taken from store shelves by the reporters, and sent all the way to Germany to be tested. (When you want precision, think Germans in lab coats!) The results came back as 0.5 ppb, 0.7 ppb, 0.9 ppb, 1.4 ppb, and 0.4 ppb. No one ever explained if detection at these levels is reliable or accurate. All tests have limits of detection, and near the limit of detection, one can be reading more "noise" than "data."

7) THE HONEY COUNCIL SUFFERS FROM FOOT-IN-MOUTH

Then, Stephen Ware of the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council got into the act, and said that MOST of the honey tested "fell well within internationally accepted limits," which was nothing but an admission that ALL of the honey had detectable nitrofurans.

8) THE HONEY COUNCIL PAUSES ONLY TO SWITCH FEET

Mr. Ware then rambled on about how one part per billion was the maximum residue limit allowed by the European Union, which may have made some viewers wonder if Australia had joined the European Union while they weren't looking. Clearly, he did not do his homework, did not know of the prawn contamination story, and hence did not address the statements made by the scientist about how dangerous one ppb can be in prawns.

9) THE HONEY COUNCIL PATS THE CITIZENS ON THEIR HEADS AND SAYS, "DON'T WORRY, TRUST US"

But worst of all, Mr. Ware made the classic error of "talking down" to the general public by quoting the "Food Standards Australia/New Zealand" group, who claimed:

"You could eat 70 jars of honey

containing one ppb of nitrofurans every day for the rest of your life without any negative effects."

The problem with statements like this is that they are pure speculation, since long-term effects in medicine are guesses, not tested lab results. People are smart enough to know this. They know that no one has ever actually EATEN that much honey, let alone contaminated honey. Such claims do not calm fears, they just look like more of a cover-up.

10) EVEN THE BEEKEEPER IS NOT WITHOUT SIN

Even Mr. Tyler the beekeeper goofed. He was asked:

"Can you give the Australian public good wholesome honey?" He replied "If it is pure Australian, yes." ...which means that the same TV reporters will promptly send samples of Australian-produced honey to that same lab in Germany, and tell them to keep looking until they find something nasty.

SUMMARY

Spin-doctoring is ONLY for highly-trained and well-prepared pros, skilled in memorizing their statements with care long in advance of being interviewed.

Beekeepers and the "honey industry" don't have any yet. Not anywhere on the planet.

Recalls are far cheaper than negative press. Cut your losses, suit-and-tie crowd! When in doubt, scrap the entire lot from warehouse to retail, and invite the press to watch you do something fun and permanently destructive with it, like feeding it into an incinerator with a large front loader, or imbedding the jars in concrete as a decorative walkway at corporate headquarters "to remind us to be vigilant in the future." You get "good" PR coverage for doing a recall.

You get grand jury indictments for NOT doing a recall. You make the call.

When a honey packer has a law firm threaten a beekeeper over what he has learned and is saying about ANOTHER country's honey, it is time to sit down and rethink priorities. **BC**

James Fischer keeps bees in the mountains of Virginia, and thought that a "Nitro-furans" meant a "very fast bear."