

NCD&CS Statement Regarding Dr. Sarah Mason/Butterball Turkey Investigation

On February 2, 2012, Dr. Mason was notified of a suspension without pay for two weeks, beginning on February 13, 2012. The Department found, and Dr. Mason has acknowledged, that it was inappropriate for her to contact a veterinarian at Butterball Turkey on December 23, 2011, to share information she had received from a fellow employee about a video depicting animal cruelty at a Butterball farm in Hoke County. The Department also found that Dr. Mason did not at first answer truthfully when she was interviewed on January 5, 2012 by Hoke County authorities about a leak of information about their investigation. We were aware that charges could be brought against Dr. Mason as a result of her actions.

In addition to the two-week suspension without pay, Dr. Mason will also be required to attend a general ethics training course and another ethics training course specific to relations with regulated businesses. She will also be required to have monthly meetings with her supervisor to review industry contacts, which are a necessary part of her duties.

While the Department in no way condones Dr. Mason's actions, there were several mitigating factors which the Department considered in deciding on this disciplinary action:

- 1) Dr. Mason has a very good work record with the Department, no prior disciplinary actions, and a reputation for honesty and integrity. This incident was out of character for her.
- 2) Dr. Mason admitted her mistakes, and since January 5, 2012 has cooperated fully with law enforcement investigators as well as with the Department's review of her actions.
- 3) The information which Dr. Mason shared with the Butterball employee was received fourth-hand through Department employees, and not directly from anyone involved with the animal cruelty investigation. The Department has no legal authority to investigate animal cruelty on farms. The only information that she received, and shared with the Butterball employee, was that Mercy For Animals had an undercover video showing abuse of turkeys at a Butterball facility, and that it had been turned over to an Assistant District Attorney in Hoke County. She did not tell anyone that Hoke County authorities were conducting a criminal investigation as a result of the video, nor was she aware or did she tell anyone that there was going to be a search warrant served at any of their facilities. We are not aware of any evidence that her actions in fact interfered with the criminal investigation, or contributed to the abuse of any animals. On the same date that she called the Butterball employee, it appears that Mercy For Animals posted its undercover video of the subject facility on YouTube, and that by the end of that day, the video had been viewed over 4,000 times. Also, we learned from a January 6, 2012 search warrant affidavit that the Mercy For Animals undercover investigator began filming at the Butterball farm on November 21 and completed filming on December 16. The assistant district attorney contacted one of our employees on December 23 for technical advice on turkey production practices. This led to the sharing of this information among several of our employees, which unfortunately resulted in Dr. Mason's call to the Butterball employee. Hoke County authorities executed a search warrant at the Butterball farm on December 28, 2011.
- 4) Dr. Mason derived no personal gain or benefit from her actions, and it does not appear that she acted with any malicious or criminal intent.