



PRESS RELEASE

Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigation *Chief Richard Weber*

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Court Accepts Pleas in Adulterated and Misbranded Cheese Cases

Two cheese companies and a cheese company executive pleaded guilty in federal court today to charges relating to their introduction of adulterated and misbranded cheese products into interstate commerce, U.S. Attorney David J. Hickton announced today.

Universal Cheese & Drying, Inc. and International Packing, LLC each pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to introduce misbranded and adulterated cheese products into interstate commerce and to commit money laundering before U.S. District Judge Mark R. Hornak for the Western District of Pennsylvania. Each company also agreed to forfeit to the United States \$500,000. Castle Cheese Company executive Michelle Myrter, 44, of Harmony, Pennsylvania, also pleaded guilty as a responsible corporate officer to one misdemeanor count of aiding and abetting the introduction of adulterated and misbranded cheese products into interstate commerce, in violation of provisions of the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act.

“The Department of Justice prosecutes people and companies who introduce adulterated or misbranded food into interstate commerce,” stated U.S. Attorney Hickton. “In this case, the fraud was perpetrated on consumers who purchased parmesan and romano cheeses that were inferior to what they believed they were buying.”

In connection with the guilty pleas, the court was advised that the corporate defendants packaged and sold cheese under various labels at the Castle Cheese facility in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. The cheese was distributed through retail, food service, and wholesale customers throughout the United States. The corporate defendants had knowledge of the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) regulations and standards of identity for parmesan and romano cheese products and were aware that the products did not conform to FDA standards of identity for real parmesan and romano cheese, but represented to customers that the products contained 100 percent real parmesan and romano cheese. The corporate defendants also knew that the cheese products were misbranded because they did not bear labels that accurately reflected the products’ ingredients. The corporate defendants likewise knew that the cheese products were also adulterated in that certain ingredients had been substituted or omitted and other

ingredients had been added. The defendants used proceeds from the sale of the misbranded and adulterated cheese products to continue the operation of the cheese manufacturing and packaging at the Slippery Rock facility.

The adulterated romano and parmesan products were sold under several brand names, the owners of which were unaware of the fraud. The adulterated products are no longer available for sale. At no time did the adulterated products pose a threat to the health or safety of consumers.

Judge Hornak will set sentencing date at a later time. For the corporate defendants, the law provides for a fine of \$500,000 for each defendant. For the individual defendant, the law provides for a total sentence of one year in prison, a fine of \$100,000, or both. Under the Federal Sentencing Guidelines, the actual sentence imposed is based upon the seriousness of the offense and the prior criminal history, if any, of the defendant.

Pending sentencing, the court released Myrter on a personal recognizance bond.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Tonia Sulia Goodman is prosecuting these cases on behalf of the government.

Federal agents with the FDA's Office of Criminal Investigations and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS)'s Criminal Investigation conducted the investigation that led to the prosecutions of Universal Cheese & Drying, Inc., International Packing, LLC and Michelle Myrter.

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