IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
TYLER DIVISION

MICHAEL FIELDS; VICKIE GRANT; JESSICA MATLOCK; and KELLY REESE,	§	
Plaintiffs,	§	
v.	§	**CIVIL ACTION NO. 6:20-cv-00475-jcb**
TYSON FOODS, INC.; TOMMY BROWN; MICAH FENTON; and FELICIA ALEXANDER,	§	
Defendants.	§	

DEFENDANT TYSON FOODS' MOTION TO DISMISS PLAINTIFFS' FIRST AMENDED COMPLAINT

Oral Argument Requested

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MOTION

Defendant Tyson Foods, Inc. ("Tyson") respectfully moves under Rule 12(b)(6) to dismiss the complaint.

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF ISSUES

In the past year, millions have been infected with the novel coronavirus, and more than 290,000 Americans have died of complications related to COVID-19. This case was filed by four Plaintiffs. They allege that they are current and former Tyson employees who contracted COVID-19 and became ill while at work at a Tyson poultry-processing facility in Carthage, Texas. The complaint pleads no theory of liability or causation other than conclusory allegations that Tyson was negligent for allegedly failing to shut down or provide sufficient protective measures. The complaint does not allege any particular incident of exposure occasioned by alleged negligence, nor does it attempt to rule out other potential causes of infection such as community spread. The complaint simply concludes that Plaintiffs became infected because they worked at Tyson. Dismissal is proper, for the following reasons.

First, lack of plausible, non-conclusory allegations. Federal pleading standards require plausible, non-conclusory allegations of causation, among other elements. It is neither just nor plausible to simply assume that Plaintiffs must have contracted COVID-19 from work merely because they worked at Tyson, much less due to Tyson's alleged actions. If the sparse allegations here were sufficient, virtually any employer, retailer, restaurant, school, or host could be sued for failing to take sufficient measures to protect anyone who worked on or visited its premises from infection. The number of lawsuits in Texas alone—which has seen over 1.3 million cases and 23,000 deaths—would be staggering. Conclusory allegations do not suffice, and dismissal is proper on that basis alone.

Second, express federal preemption. Even if it could be plausibly alleged that Plaintiffs were infected while at work and because of Tyson's negligence, the complaint fails to allege how its theory of liability could fit within the express preemption of the federal Poultry Products Inspection Act ("PPIA"). The PPIA authorizes the U.S. Department of Agriculture to regulate infectious diseases at poultry-processing facilities, and it has done so through a comprehensive regulatory regime that expressly prohibits states from adopting different or additional requirements. Dismissal is appropriate on that basis as well. *See, e.g.*, *Horowitz v. Stryker Corp.*, 613 F. Supp. 2d 271, 280 (E.D.N.Y. 2009) (dismissing complaint for failure to plead allegations sufficient to avoid preemption under FDA regulations), *cited with approval in Bass v. Stryker Corp.*, 669 F.3d 501, 509 (5th Cir. 2012).

Finally, the federal designations and Presidential orders. The complaint also takes no account of the national emergency declared by the President, the designation of Tyson as critical infrastructure, and additional reinforcing federal directives, and should be dismissed on that basis as well.

BACKGROUND

A. The First Amended Complaint

Plaintiffs filed their Original Petition in the County Court at Law in Panola County, Texas in July 2020, naming Tyson employees Tommy Brown, Micah Fenton, and Felicia Alexander as defendants. [Dkt. 1-1] Defendants timely removed based on federal officer and federal question jurisdiction. [Dkt. 1] After removal, Defendants moved to dismiss the Original Petition under Rule 12(b)(6) on September 4, 2020. [Dkt. 3] Plaintiffs then filed a First Amended Complaint on September 25, 2020, and added Tyson as a defendant. [Dkt. 7]

Rather than plead individualized facts, the First Amended Complaint merely alleges that each Plaintiff "worked at Tyson's Carthage, Texas facility and contracted

COVID-19 because of the unsafe working conditions at the Carthage, Texas facility." [Dkt. 7 ¶¶ 5-8, 21] But Plaintiffs allege no facts as to how, when, or why they contracted COVID-19, or facts ruling out contraction from another community source.

Plaintiffs also vaguely assert that Tyson "failed to take adequate precautions to protect the workers at its meatpacking facilities, including the Carthage, Texas meatpacking facility," and allege in particular that Tyson failed in the following respects:

a. Requiring Plaintiffs to "continue working" at the facility;

b. Failing to provide adequate personal protective equipment;

c. Failing to implement social distancing;

d. Failing to follow guidelines set forth by the World Health Organization ("WHO") and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("CDC");

e. Failing to warn of dangerous conditions regarding COVID-19;

f. Failing to provide "adequate medical treatment"; and

g. Allowing individuals infected with COVID-19 to continue working.

[Dkt. 7 ¶¶ 15, 21] Again, Plaintiffs do not allege any incident or mechanism tied to Tyson's alleged negligence that led to Plaintiffs' illness, nor do they account for or attempt to rule out other sources of infection.

B. Federal regulation of meat and poultry facilities

Tyson is the largest food company in the U.S., providing more than 20% of the nation's supply of meat and poultry—enough to feed 60 million Americans every day. Tyson employs more than 120,000 workers at processing facilities.

Tyson's Carthage facility is subject to federal regulation under the Poultry Products Inspection Act of 1957, 21 U.S.C. §§ 451 *et seq.*; *see also* FSIS Meat, Poultry and Egg Product Inspection Directory at 537 (Nov. 30, 2020) (identifying the Carthage

facility as establishment number P7044).[1] The Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service ("FSIS") promulgates the relevant regulations. *See* 9 C.F.R. § 300.2(a), (b)(2). That rulemaking authority expressly preempts any attempt by the states to impose "additional" or "different" requirements. *See* 21 U.S.C. § 467e.

FSIS has issued hundreds of rigorous, detailed regulations to govern poultry processors' facilities and operations in minute detail, from the physical structure of the facility, to the details of the processing operation, to the many inspection requirements such facilities must satisfy, among many other subjects. *See* 9 C.F.R. §§ 300.1 *et seq*. And, as discussed in more detail in Section II below, those regulations address the use of personal protective equipment and the control of infectious disease, and the allegations in this case fall squarely within the expressly preempted scope of the PPIA.

C. Designation of critical infrastructure

The federal government has designated food producers like Tyson as part of the country's critical infrastructure, underscoring the essential nature of such producers by ordering those facilities to operate pursuant to federal CDC guidelines.

Declarations of national emergency. On March 13, 2020, the President declared that "the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States constitutes a national emergency, beginning March 1, 2020." Exec. Office of Pres., *Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak*, 85 Fed. Reg. 15,337, 15,337 (Mar. 18, 2020). Similar emergency declarations were issued for Texas and Panola County. U.S. Dep't of Homeland Sec., *Texas; Major Disaster and Related Determinations*, 85 Fed. Reg. 20,699, 20,699-700 (Apr. 14, 2020); State of Tex., *Governor*

[1] https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/bf8d9766-9767-4e0c-a9f1-efea0b2a42bc/MPI_Directory_Establishment_Name.pdf?MOD=AJPERES. This Court may properly take judicial notice of information contained on a governmental agency's webpage. *See Swindol v. Aurora Flight Scis. Corp.*, 805 F.3d 516, 518-19 (5th Cir. 2015).

Abbott Declares State of Disaster in Texas Due to COVID-19, Mar. 13, 2020;[2] Cty. of Panola, Tex., *Declaration of Local Disaster Due to Public Health Emergency*, Mar. 25, 2020.[3]

Critical infrastructure industries should follow CDC guidelines. Soon after, on March 16, the President issued *Coronavirus Guidelines for America*, which emphasized that, unlike workers in some industries, employees in "critical infrastructure industr[ies]," including "food supply," have a "special responsibility" and should "follow CDC guidance." Exec. Office of Pres., *The President's Coronavirus Guidelines for America* ("Coronavirus Guidelines for America"), Mar. 16, 2020, at 2.[4]

Texas issued a similar order on March 31 recognizing food-processing facilities within the state as essential infrastructure. *See* State of Tex., *Governor Abbott Issues Executive Order Implementing Essential Services and Activities Protocols*, Mar. 31, 2020, at 3 (adopting CISA definition and declaring that "all critical infrastructure should be allowed to remain operational").[5]

Those directives were further embodied in an April 28, 2020 executive order issued by the President under the Defense Production Act of 1950 ("DPA"), 50 U.S.C. §§ 4501 *et seq.* *See* Exec. Office of Pres., *Executive Order on Delegating Authority Under the DPA with Respect to Food Supply Chain Resources During the National Emergency Caused by the Outbreak of COVID-19* ("Food Supply Chain Resources"), 85 Fed. Reg. 26,313, 26,313 (Apr. 28, 2020). In that order, the President directed the

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[2] https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-declares-state-of-disaster-in-texas-due-to-covid-19.

[3] http://www.co.panola.tx.us/upload/page/2889/2020%20Home/Declaration-LocalDisaster3.25.2020.pdf.

[4] https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/03.16.20_coronavirus-guidance_8.5x11_315PM.pdf.

[5] https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-issues-executive-order-implementing-essential-services-and-activities-protocols.

Secretary of Agriculture "to ensure that meat and poultry processors continue operations consistent with the guidance for their operations jointly issued by the CDC and OSHA." *Id.* The President specifically underscored that "[i]t is important that processors of beef, pork, and poultry . . . in the food supply chain continue operating and fulfilling orders to ensure a continued supply of protein for Americans." *Id.*

The same day, the Secretary of Agriculture announced that his Department would "work with meat processing to affirm they will operate in accordance with the CDC and OSHA guidance" and "ensure that facilities implementing this guidance to keep employees safe can continue operating." U.S. Dep't of Agric., *USDA to Implement President Trump's Executive Order on Meat and Poultry Processors*, Apr. 28, 2020.[6] Reiterating that "[o]ur nation's meat and poultry processing facilities play an integral role in the continuity of our food supply chain," the Secretary explained that the CDC and OSHA guidance would "help ensure employee safety to reopen plants or to continue to operate those still open" and "ensure that these plants are allowed to operate to produce the meat protein that Americans need." *Id.*

Continued operations are governed by federal standards. Following the President's direction, the Secretary of Agriculture ordered "meat and poultry processing plants" to apply the CDC and OSHA guidance "specific to the meat and poultry processing industry to implement practices and protocols for safeguarding the health of the workers and the community while staying operational or resuming operations." Letter from Sonny Perdue, Sec'y of Agric., to Stakeholders ("Stakeholders Letter") (May 5, 2020);[7] *see also* Letter from Sonny Perdue, Sec'y of Agric., to Governors at 1

[6] https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/04/28/usda-implement-president-trumps-executive-order-meat-and-poultry.

[7] https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/stakeholder-letters-covid.pdf.

(May 5, 2020) ("Governors Letter") (same);[8] U.S. Dep't of Agric., *Secretary Perdue Issues Letters on Meat Packing Expectations*, May 6, 2020 (same).[9] And the Department of Agriculture has continued to emphasize that "critical infrastructure meatpacking facilities across the United States" must continue operating under federal guidance. U.S. Dep't of Agric., *America's Meatpacking Facilities Practicing Safe Reopening to Ensure a Stable Food Supply*, May 8, 2020, at 1;[10] *see also, e.g.*, U.S. Dep't of Agric., *USDA, FDA Strengthen U.S. Food Supply Chain Protections During COVID-19 Pandemic*, May 19, 2020, at 2 ("All of the food and agriculture sector . . . are considered critical infrastructure, and it is vital for the public health that they continue to operate in accordance with guidelines from the CDC and OSHA regarding worker health and safety.").[11]

With the ever-changing understanding of COVID-19, the CDC and OSHA have continually updated their guidance as new information about the disease comes to light. *See Meat and Poultry Processing Workers and Employers Meat & Poultry Processors: Interim Guidance from CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)* (updated July 9, 2020).[12] But the message from the President and the Department of Agriculture has remained clear and unchanged from the beginning: Meat and poultry processors should continue to operate subject to applicable federal guidance from the CDC and OSHA.

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[8] https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/governor-letters-covid.pdf.

[9] https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/05/06/secretary-perdue-issues-letters-meat-packing-expectations.

[10] https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/05/08/americas-meatpacking-facilities-practicing-safe-reopening-ensure.

[11] https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/05/19/usda-fda-strengthen-us-food-supply-chain-protections-during-covid.

[12] https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/meat-poultry-processing-workers-employers.html.

ARGUMENT

I. The complaint's allegations of causation are far too conclusory and speculative under *Iqbal* and *Twombly*.

Complaints must contain "sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to 'state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.'" *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (citation omitted). "To be plausible, the complaint's '[f]actual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.'" *In re Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Co.*, 624 F.3d 201, 210 (5th Cir. 2010) (citation omitted). "A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable . . . ." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678.

Applying those standards is "a two-step inquiry." *Waller v. Hanlon*, 922 F.3d 590, 599 (5th Cir. 2019). *First*, the Court must "identify the complaint's well-pleaded factual content." *Id.* Significantly, the "assumption of truth" does not apply to "pleadings that . . . are no more than conclusions." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. As this Court has frequently noted:

> The Court does not accept as true "conclusory allegations, unwarranted factual inferences, or legal conclusions." While legal conclusions can provide the complaint's framework, they must be supported by factual allegations. *Iqbal*, [556 U.S. at 678] ("[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice [and] [l]egal conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth.")

Lloyd v. Jones, No. 9:18-CV-211, 2019 WL 4786874, at *6 (E.D. Tex. Sept. 10, 2019) (Giblin, J.) (citations omitted).

Second, having identified the "well-pleaded factual allegations," *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679, the Court "ask[s] whether th[ose] remaining allegations 'are sufficient to nudge the [plaintiff's] claim across the "plausibility" threshold,'" *Waller*, 922 F.3d at 599 (quoting *Doe v. Robertson*, 751 F.3d 383, 390 (5th Cir. 2014)). This is a "context-specific task" and "requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and

common sense," *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679, in determining whether the court "can reasonably infer from the complaint's well-pleaded factual content 'more than the mere possibility of [liability].'" *Waller*, 922 F.3d at 599 (quoting *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 679).

This standard is not met when the alleged harm could be explained by an alternative theory that the complaint does not plead "sufficient factual matter" to rebut. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678; *see also*, *e.g.*, *Eclectic Props. E., LLC v. Marcus & Millichap Co.*, 751 F.3d 990, 998-99 (9th Cir. 2014) (dismissal required where allegations are "consistent with both [the plaintiff's] theory of liability and [an] innocent alternative"). Simply put, more than a "sheer possibility" of liability is required to survive a motion to dismiss. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678.

Plaintiffs fail to properly allege causation. Plaintiffs allege that they "contracted COVID-19" and have "experienced significant injuries as a result." [Dkt. 7 ¶¶ 5-8, 16] But to establish causation, Plaintiffs must plead—and ultimately prove—that they contracted COVID-19 *from their place of work* rather than elsewhere, and then, that they contracted COVID-19 *due to Tyson's alleged negligence* rather than some other cause. *See* Texas Wrongful Death Act, Tex. Civ. Prac. & Rem. Code § 71.002(b) (1985) (imposing liability only "if the injury was *caused by* the person's . . . wrongful act") (emphasis added).

Here, the complaint contains no such allegations. It merely repeats the same one-sentence allegation that each Plaintiff "contracted COVID-19 because of the unsafe working conditions at the Carthage, Texas facility." [Dkt. 7 ¶¶ 5-8][13] That is precisely the sort of "unadorned, the-defendant-unlawfully-harmed-me accusation" that a court cannot accept as true in ruling on a motion to dismiss. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678.

[13] The only other references to causation—that Tyson "was the cause of the underlying incident," Plaintiffs' injuries were "a direct and proximate result of Defendants' breaches of duty," or similar (Dkt. 7 ¶¶ 19, 23, 32, 34)—are conclusory statements of law, and thus could not be credited even if they were non-conclusory.

As the Supreme Court instructed, a plaintiff cannot satisfy Rule 8(a) simply by "tender[ing] 'naked assertion[s]' devoid of 'further factual enhancement.'" *Id.* (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 557 (2007)).

At least one federal district court recently dismissed a similar complaint brought by COVID-infected passengers of Princess Cruise Lines, holding that while the passengers "allege they 'contracted COVID-19 on Defendant's ship, [the complaint] fails to contain sufficient allegations to plausibly support that conclusion.'" Order at 8, *Fish v. Princess Cruise Lines Ltd.*, No. CV 20-3894 DSF (JCx) (C.D. Cal. Aug. 21, 2020), ECF No. 26 (citing *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678).

Nor are allegations based on "mere speculation" enough, as this Court has recognized. *See, e.g.*, *Price v. Wallace*, Civ. A. No. 1:13cv677, 2016 WL 5339700, at *5 (E.D. Tex. Aug. 23, 2016) (Giblin, J.) (dismissing complaint that "failed to show . . . causation" or allege facts from which it "may plausibly be inferred" where allegations were based on "no more than mere speculation on the part of plaintiff"); *see also Doe v. Boys Clubs of Greater Dallas, Inc.*, 907 S.W.2d 472, 477 (Tex. 1995) (causation "cannot be established by mere conjecture, guess, or speculation"). For these reasons alone, Plaintiffs' claim fails.

Judicial experience and common sense. *Iqbal* also instructed courts to use their "judicial experience and common sense," 556 U.S. at 679, and thus Plaintiffs' bare allegation that they contracted COVID-19 "at" Tyson's facility must be considered against the backdrop of knowledge—all of which is properly subject to judicial notice—that the virus is highly contagious, has proven extremely difficult to trace, and has been transmitted widely through community spread across Texas and the nation.[14] For example:

[14] As noted, this Court may properly take judicial notice of information contained on a governmental agency's webpage. *See supra* at 6 n.1 (citing authorities). This Court also may "take judicial notice of agency records and reports." *Terrebonne v.*

- **Community spread.** The rapid spread of COVID-19 arises from community spread, defined by the CDC to mean "people have been infected with the virus in an area, including some *who are not sure how or where they became infected*."[15]

- **Highly contagious.** As of December 13th, more than 15 million cases have been confirmed nationwide. Texas has reported over 1.3 million cases.[16] And the numbers in the U.S. and Texas continued to increase despite stay-at-home orders, mandatory-mask orders, size limitations on gatherings, etc.[17]

- **Many unreported cases.** The CDC estimates that, for every reported case of COVID-19 in the United States, there are ten more unreported cases—in part because millions of Americans have been unknowingly infected.[18]

Blackburn, 646 F.2d 997, 1000 n.4 (5th Cir. 1981). Consistent with these rules, courts across the country—including the Fifth Circuit—have taken judicial notice of basic information about COVID-19 and the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. *See In re Abbott*, 954 F.3d 772, 779 (5th Cir. 2020) (relying on COVID-19 statistics and information from the CDC); *Valentine v. Collier*, 960 F.3d 707, 708 n.1 (5th Cir. 2020) ("Indeed, this court has taken judicial notice of statistics concerning COVID-19 already.") (citing *Abbott*, 954 F.3d at 779).

[15] CDC, *Frequently Asked Questions: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)* (last updated Nov. 13, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html (emphasis added); *see also* CDC, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Cases in the U.S.* (updated Dec. 6, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html; Tex. Dep't of State Health Servs., *Texas Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)* (last updated Dec. 6, 2020), https://dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/additionaldata.aspx.

[16] *See* CDC, *U.S. COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State* (updated Dec. 13, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases; *see also* Tex. Dep't of State Health Servs., *Texas Case Counts COVID-19* (last updated Dec. 12, 2020), https://txdshs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/ed483ecd702b4298ab01e8b9cafc8b83.

[17] *See* CDC, *Trends in Number of COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in the US Reported to CDC, by State/Territory* (updated Dec. 5, 2020), https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_dailytrendscases.

[18] *See* CDC, *Transcript for the CDC Telebriefing Update on COVID-19* (June 25, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/t0625-COVID-19-update.html.

- **Delayed onset and asymptomatic carriers.** Tracking is difficult because the time between exposure and symptom onset can average a week or more, and because of the large percentage of infected people who are asymptomatic.[19] Even for symptomatic individuals, the incubation period—the time between exposure and symptom onset—varies on average between 2 to 14 days; thus, someone can be infected for up to 14 days before realizing they are sick.[20] Other infected individuals never realize they were sick.[21] Pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic persons are believed to be a significant cause of the pandemic's propagation.[22]

- **Protections are not perfect.** While the CDC, OSHA, and others have identified steps that can be taken to decrease risk of the spread of infectious diseases such as COVID-19, such as using personal protective equipment ("PPE"), social distancing, and increased handwashing,[23] the effectiveness of such steps is admittedly limited.[24] Even among healthcare providers and others who

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[19] *See The Implications of Silent Transmission for the Control of COVID-19 Outbreaks* ("Silent Transmission"), Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America (July 28, 2020), https://www.pnas.org/content/117/30/17513; CDC, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Interim Clinical Guidance for Management of Patients with Confirmed Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)* ("Clinical Guidance for Management of Patients") (updated Nov. 3, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/clinical-guidance-management-patients.html.

[20] *See* CDC, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Clinical Questions about COVID-19 Questions and Answers* (last updated Dec. 4, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/faq.html#Transmission; *see also Clinical Guidance for Management of Patients*.

[21] *See* CDC, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): COVID-19 Pandemic Planning Scenarios* (updated Sept. 10, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/planning-scenarios.html.

[22] *See Silent Transmission*.

[23] *See, e.g.*, CDC, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): How to Protect Yourself & Others* (updated Nov. 27, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html.

[24] For example, while recommended, OSHA has determined that PPE is the least effective mechanism for protecting employees on the "hierarchy of controls." OSHA,

> are using PPE and other protective measures to minimize exposure, the disease is widespread.

In short, in a society in which the coronavirus was—and is—spreading widely throughout the community, the conclusory allegation that an individual contracted the virus "at" work is not a well-pleaded fact and, in the absence of any further detail or support, is not entitled to an "assumption of truth." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678-79; *see also Guidry v. Bank of LaPlace*, 954 F.2d 278, 281 (5th Cir. 1992) ("[C]onclusory allegations . . . are not admitted as true.").

Analogous cases. In analogous cases, courts routinely dismiss complaints for failure to properly allege causation where "judicial experience and common sense" indicate that causation cannot plausibly be assumed. *See, e.g.*:

- **Pneumonia**—*Peterson v. Silverado Senior Living, Inc.*, 790 F. App'x 614, 617 (5th Cir. 2019) (affirming dismissal where, "[e]ven accepting the alleged facts as true, the Peterson's second amended complaint is insufficient to support a plausible inference that Silverado's actions were more likely than not the cause of Ruby's death" because, *e.g.*, "we are being asked first to agree that, of all possible causes, Seroquel caused Ruby's pneumonia");
- **Abdominal pain and liver problems**—*Cary v. Hickenlooper*, 673 F. App'x 870, 875 (10th Cir. 2016) ("But he makes only conclusory assertions that these conditions are the result of exposure to toxic water at SCF. He fails to present any specific facts to show that his exposure to minimally elevated levels of uranium or other toxins at SCF has caused or exacerbated these problems.");
- **Abdominal infections**—*Rincon v. Covidien*, No. 16-CV-10033 (JMF), 2017 WL 2242969, at *1 (S.D.N.Y. May 22, 2017) ("Ignoring conclusory assertions and the recitation of legal standards,

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Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19 at 12, https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf; *see also* https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/faq.html#Infection-Control; https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/hierarchy/default.html.

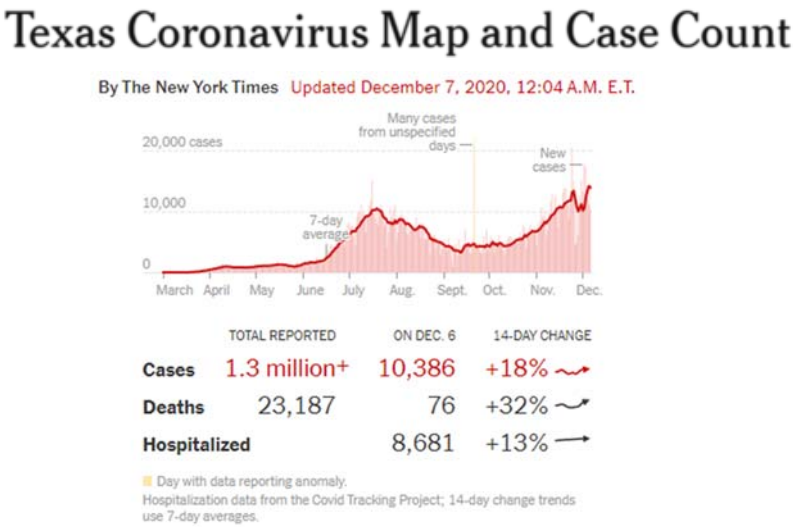
> however, Rincon fails to allege any facts that plausibly establish . . . causation. . . . Nothing in the Amended Complaint even endeavors to explain why the [defendant's alleged negligence] is a more likely, let alone proximate, cause of Rincon's alleged harms. In the final analysis, therefore, Rincon offers only the sort of '[t]hreadbare recital[] of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements,' that the Supreme Court has made clear is insufficient to survive a motion to dismiss.") (quoting *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678).

Similar to these cases, no inference of causation or wrongdoing is warranted from the bare allegation that Plaintiffs became ill with COVID-19. The fact that Plaintiffs contracted a highly contagious disease does not raise any suggestion that Tyson, or anyone else, was negligent. Indeed, there are many alternative sources of infection, none of which the complaint rules out. Plaintiffs could have contracted COVID-19 in their communities or residences, in retail stores or other essential businesses, from an asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic person, from a symptomatic person not wearing a mask, or from a virus-contaminated fomite—all potential sources unrelated to Tyson's alleged actions or inaction.[25]

* * *

[25] The Governor of Texas issued a stay-at-home order effective April 2, but began reopening certain non-essential businesses as soon as May 1, and only in July issued an order directing that face masks be worn in some circumstances. *See* https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/EO-GA-18_expanded_reopening_of_services_COVID-19.pdf.

The complaint fails under established standards, and it is especially important to adhere to those standards here. Texas alone has seen more than 1.3 million confirmed cases and more than 23,000 deaths as of this filing:



If conclusory allegations of causation are permitted, virtually any employer, business, school, church, or host could be brought into protracted litigation based on nothing but speculation.

II. The complaint takes no account of the broad, express preemption of the Poultry Products Inspection Act.

Even if the complaint's allegations were not conclusory, they would still fail to state a claim because they take no account of the federal preemption that applies to federally regulated poultry facilities.

The doctrine of federal preemption—based on the Supremacy Clause of the U.S. Constitution—exists "to avoid conflicting regulation of conduct by various official bodies which might have some authority over the subject matter." *Amalgamated Ass'n of St., Elec. Ry. & Motor Coach Emps. v. Lockridge*, 403 U.S. 274, 285-86 (1971). Here, Plaintiffs' claims are subject to broad federal preemption:

- The PPIA expressly preempts all state-law requirements that are "in addition to, or different than," those set through federal regulation under the PPIA.

- The operation of meat-processing facilities—including the "control" of "infectious diseases"—is expressly and exclusively regulated by the PPIA.
- Therefore, state requirements regarding the control of infectious disease in meat processing facilities—including the common-law duties asserted by Plaintiffs in this case—are preempted.

Plaintiffs' state-law tort claims cannot go forward without taking account of the preemptive scope of the PPIA, which the current complaint does not do.

A. The PPIA expressly preempts state-law requirements that differ from or add to the PPIA regulations.

The PPIA expressly preempts any attempt by the states to impose regulations that are "in addition to, or different than" those prescribed under the Act:

> Requirements within the scope of this [Act] with respect to premises, facilities and operations of any official establishment which are in addition to, or different than those made under this [Act] may not be imposed by any State . . . .

21 U.S.C. § 467e. This provision is "substantially identical" to the preemption provision in the Federal Meat Inspection Act ("FMIA"), which the Supreme Court has emphasized "sweeps widely" and "prevents a State from imposing any additional or different—even if non-conflicting—requirements that fall within the scope of the Act and concern a slaughterhouse's facilities or operations." *Nat'l Meat Ass'n v. Harris*, 565 U.S. 452, 459-60 (2012); *Grocery Mfrs. of Am., Inc. v. Gerace*, 755 F.2d 993, 997 (2d Cir. 1985) (PPIA and FMIA preemption provisions substantially identical) (citing 21 U.S.C. § 678).

Significantly, whether a requirement falls "within the scope of" the PPIA—and is therefore preempted—does not depend on whether the FSIS has adopted or rejected the requirement. Instead, if the FSIS "*could* issue regulations under the FMIA . . . mandating" the requirement at issue, then the State's requirement is preempted. *Id.* at 466 (emphasis added).

Here, as discussed below, there is no question that FSIS "could issue regulations" regarding the use of personal protective equipment and the prevention of infectious disease within meat processing facilities, because it has *already done so*. 9 C.F.R. § 416.5. For that reason, state requirements regarding those topics are preempted. 21 U.S.C. § 467e.

B. The PPIA regulates the control of "infectious disease" at poultry-processing facilities.

As detailed above, FSIS has promulgated hundreds of pages of federal regulations that regulate the processing and distribution of poultry products. Those regulations include directives regarding infectious disease, including:

- A "disease control" regulation that requires that "[a]ny person who has or appears to have an infectious disease . . . must be excluded from any operations which could result in product adulteration and the creation of insanitary conditions until the condition is corrected." 9 C.F.R. § 416.5(c).
- Regulations regarding the required use of personal protective equipment such as "[a]prons, frocks, and other outer clothing worn by persons who handle product," as well as detailed sanitation and hygiene regulations for things such as "hand rinsing facilities must have a continuous flow of water" for onsite poultry inspectors. *Id.* §§ 415.5(b), 381.36(c).
- Regulations requiring facilities to "monitor and document any work-related conditions of establishment workers," to "encourage early reporting of symptoms of injuries and illnesses," to provide "[n]otification to employees of the nature and early symptoms of occupational illnesses and injuries"; to post "the FSIS/OSHA poster encouraging reporting and describing reportable signs and symptoms"; and to "[m]onitor[] on a regular and routine basis . . . injury and illness logs, as well as nurse or medical office logs,

> workers' compensation data, and any other injury or illness information available." 9 C.F.R. § 381.45.

In short, the Court need not speculate whether FSIS "could issue" regulations regarding infectious disease and the use of personal protective equipment. Those regulations already exist.

C. Plaintiffs cannot impose state-law "requirements" that differ from or add to the PPIA's regulations.

Plaintiffs allege that Tyson was negligent in failing to implement various measures, such as "provid[ing] adequate PPE," "implement[ing] adequate precautions and social distancing," and in "[a]llow[ing] and requir[ing] individuals who were infected . . . to continue to work." [Dkt. 7 ¶ 21(a)-(i)] But for this motion, the dispositive point is this: each of the alleged failings Plaintiffs offer is *different from* or *in addition to* the requirements that FSIS has imposed regarding employee hygiene and infectious disease—and therefore each is preempted.

This Court's decision in *Scott v. Pfizer, Inc.*, is on point. 249 F.R.D. 248 (E.D. Tex. 2008) (Heartfield, J., adopting report and recommendations of Giblin, J.). In *Scott*, the Court concluded that claims against a bone cement manufacturer were preempted by the Medical Devices Amendments ("MDA") to the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. *Id.* at 255. That holding was based in large part on two factors, both of which are also present in this case.

First, the Court noted that the MDA—like the PPIA in this case—contains a preemption clause that precludes the states from imposing any requirement for a medical device "which is different from, or in addition to, any requirement applicable under" the MDA. *Id.* at 253. *Compare* PPIA, *with* 21 U.S.C. § 467e (states may not impose requirements "which are in addition to, or different than those made under" the Act).

Second, like the PPIA, the Court emphasized that existing federal regulations under the MDA were "rigorous," requiring manufacturers to submit "detailed information regarding the safety and efficacy of their devices" that is required by the FDA "before granting marketing approval." *Id. Compare* PPIA regulations, *with* 9 C.F.R. §§ 300 *et seq.* (comprising hundreds of pages of regulations setting forth detailed sanitation requirements and inspection protocols that must be met prior to release of product to market).

The Court correctly found that the tort claims in *Scott* sought to impose requirements that were "different from, or in addition to" federal regulatory requirements:

> If [the plaintiff] were to prevail on his claims as pled—including [negligence and other tort claims] all based upon the Simplex bone cement—it would result in the imposition of a state requirement which is "different from, or in addition to" the requirements and regulations already imposed by the FDA.

Scott, 249 F.R.D. at 255. For that reason, the Court concluded that under "Fifth Circuit and Supreme Court precedent, the Plaintiff's state law claims are subject to preemption under the statutory preemption language of . . . the MDA." *Id.*

The same analysis applies here: Plaintiffs seek requirements that are "in addition to, or different than" the requirements of the PPIA, in direct contradiction to the express preemption requirements of that Act, and are, therefore, preempted. And as *Scott* itself makes clear, preemption applies even where a claim seeks to impose different and additional requirements through a tort claim rather than by state statute. Common-law tort liability is a state "requirement." *Riegel v. Medtronic, Inc.*, 552 U.S. 312, 324 (2008) (quoting *Cipollone v. Liggett Grp., Inc.*, 505 U.S. 504, 522 (1992)); *see also Bates v. Dow Agrosciences LLC*, 544 U.S. 431, 445 (2005) (same).

Because the requirements urged by Plaintiffs here fall within the PPIA's scope and differ from the FSIS's regulations, Plaintiffs' claims are expressly preempted by the PPIA.[26]

* * *

The complaint takes no account of the PPIA, but a complaint sufficient to survive Rule 12(b)(6) must do so. There is preemption in this area, and any statement of a state-law standard of care cannot conflict with or add to the standards of the PPIA. *See Horowitz*, 613 F. Supp. 2d at 280 (dismissing complaint that failed to include allegations to avoid preemption under FDA regulations); *Delaney v. Stryker Orthopaedics*, Civ. A. No. 08-03210 (DMC), 2009 WL 564243, at *4 (D.N.J. Mar. 5, 2009) (similar).

III. The complaint takes no account of the federal designation of Tyson facilities as critical infrastructure.

The complaint also fails to take account of the designation of food companies as critical infrastructure by the President, as well as repeated federal directives that Tyson and other meat and poultry processors continue operations pursuant to federal CDC guidelines as a critical source of food during the pandemic.

Just days after declaring a national emergency, the President explained that employees in "critical infrastructure industr[ies]," including food and agricultural workers, have a "special responsibility" to continue to follow CDC guidelines while providing food during the national emergency. *Coronavirus Guidelines for America* at 2. The President reinforced this directive through the *Food Supply Chain Resources* executive order under the DPA:

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[26] A state-law requirement that "endeavors to regulate the same thing, at the same time, in the same place—except by imposing different requirements" than the federal requirements—is expressly preempted. *See Harris*, 565 U.S. at 468; *Osburn v. Anchor Labs., Inc.*, 825 F.2d 908, 911 (5th Cir. 1987) ("State common law as well as state statutes and regulations can be preempted by federal law."); *see also*, *e.g.*, *Geier v. Am. Honda Motor Co.*, 529 U.S. 861, 881 (2000) (same).

> It is important that processors of beef, pork, and poultry ("meat and poultry") in the food supply chain **continue operating and fulfilling orders** to ensure a continued supply of protein for Americans.
>
> * * *
>
> [C]losures **threaten the continued functioning** of the national meat and poultry supply chain, undermining critical infrastructure during the national emergency.
>
> * * *
>
> [T]he Secretary of Agriculture shall take all appropriate action . . . to **ensure that meat and poultry processors continue operations** consistent with the guidance for their operations jointly issued by the CDC and OSHA.

85 Fed. Reg. at 26,313 (emphases added).

The President's determinations preempt state law. Congress gave the President discretion to determine the "manner," "conditions," and "extent" of critical infrastructure industries' operations during a national emergency. 50 U.S.C. § 4511(a). Moreover, the DPA "accord[s] the Executive Branch great flexibility" in "seek[ing] compliance with its priorities policies," ranging from "informal means of persuasion" (such as the *Coronavirus Guidelines for America*) to more "formal or technical acts" (such as the *Food Supply Chain Resources* executive order). *E. Air Lines, Inc. v. McDonnell Douglas Corp.*, 532 F.2d 957, 993-94 (5th Cir. 1976). Once the President has made those determinations, however, "state law is naturally preempted to the extent of any conflict." *Crosby v. Nat'l Foreign Trade Council*, 530 U.S. 363, 372 (2000).

Significantly, "[s]uch a conflict occurs" whenever state law would "stan[d] as an obstacle to the accomplishment and execution of the full purposes and objectives of Congress." *Hillman v. Maretta*, 569 U.S. 483, 490 (2013) (quoting *Hines v. Davidowitz*, 312 U.S. 52, 67 (1941)). The President's determinations here—concerning operation of critical infrastructure during a national emergency—"represent[] a national response to a specific problem of 'truly national' concern." *Rancho Viejo, LLC v. Norton*, 323 F.3d 1062, 1078-79 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (quoting *United States v. Morrison*, 529 U.S. 598, 617-18

(2000)). Subjecting those national determinations to "concurrent jurisdiction" by "local law" would "defeat the congressional goals underlying" the DPA. *Lockridge*, 403 U.S. at 286. Indeed, "[t]o interpret . . . the exercise of the [President's] power" as permitting "the continuance of a state power limiting and controlling the national authority" would simply "deny its existence." *N. Pac. Ry. Co. v. State of N.D. ex rel. Langer*, 250 U.S. 135, 150 (1919); *see also Dames & Moore v. Regan*, 453 U.S. 654, 673 (1981) (rejecting argument whose "practical effect" would "allow individual claimants throughout the country to minimize or wholly eliminate" the President's statutory authority); *Dakota Cent. Tel. Co. v. State of S.D. ex rel. Payne*, 250 U.S. 163, 185, 186 (1919) (state lacked "power . . . to 'incumber' the authority of the United States" by "limit[ing] the grant of authority" to the President). For that reason, the President's determination of priorities preempts states' attempts to impose their own determinations.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Crosby* illustrates this point. *Crosby* invalidated a Massachusetts law prohibiting its agencies from transacting with companies that also conducted business with Burma "owing to [the state law's] threat of frustrating federal statutory objectives." 530 U.S. at 366. But Congress had clearly given the President "flexible and effective authority over economic sanctions against Burma." *Id.* at 374. Because Congress had "gone to such lengths to empower the President," a state law that would "blunt the consequences of discretionary Presidential action" under the statute would impermissibly "compromise his effectiveness" and thus is preempted. *Id.* at 376.

Similarly here, there is no way that states can impose their own determinations regarding the "manner," "conditions," and "extent" of meat and poultry processors' operations during COVID-19 without compromising the President's ability to make those determinations for the entire nation. 50 U.S.C. § 4511(a). The President confirmed as much in the *Food Supply Chain Resources* order, in which he directed the Secretary of Agriculture "to ensure that meat and poultry processors continue operations consistent with the guidance for their operations jointly issued by the CDC and

OSHA." He explained that additional executive action to enforce his priorities determinations—in the form of an executive order—was warranted because inconsistent actions by the states "threaten the continued functioning of the national meat and poultry supply chain, undermining critical infrastructure during the national emergency." *Id.* As this explanation makes clear, the President's national priorities determinations under the DPA must preempt states' abilities to make their own determinations in order for that statutory authority to have any meaning.

Preemption applies to tort claims. The preemption doctrine applies not only to state statutes and regulations, but also to common law tort claims. *See, e.g.*, *Geier*, 529 U.S. at 874-86 (state-law tort preempted by federal safety standard); *see also San Diego Bldg. Trades Council, Millmen's Union, Local 2020 v. Garmon*, 359 U.S. 236, 246-47 (1959) (Congress's "concern is with delimiting areas of conduct which must be free from state regulation if national policy is to be left unhampered," and "[s]uch regulation can be as effectively exerted through an award of damages as through some form of preventive relief.").

* * *

Plaintiffs seek to impose liability based on Tyson's alleged failure to operate consistently with state-law standards governing its operations. [Dkt. 7 ¶¶ 21, 28] But application of those standards to a meat or poultry processor's operations during COVID-19 would "stan[d] as an obstacle to the accomplishment and execution of [Congress's] full purposes and objectives" in the same way as a state statute or regulation imposing the standards: They would impermissibly undermine the President's statutory authority to adopt national priorities determinations. *Hines*, 312 U.S. at 67. Plaintiffs' claims are therefore preempted.

CONCLUSION

Based upon the foregoing, Tyson respectfully requests the complaint be dismissed.

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Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Christopher S. Coleman
Zachary T. Mayer
Texas Bar No. 24013118
J. Edward Johnson
Texas Bar No. 24070001
MAYER LLP
750 N. St. Paul Street - #700
Dallas, Texas 75201

Christopher S. Coleman
Admitted *pro hac vice*
PERKINS COIE LLP
2901 North Central Avenue, Suite 2000
Phoenix, Arizona 85012

Mary Z. Gaston
Admitted *pro hac vice*
PERKINS COIE LLP
1201 Third Avenue, Suite 4900
Seattle, Washington 98101

ATTORNEYS FOR DEFENDANTS

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

This is to certify that, on December 14, 2020, a true and correct copy of the foregoing document was served upon all counsel of record via the Court's CM/ECF system as follows:

Kurt Arnold
Caj Boatright
Roland Christensen
Joseph McGowin
Claire Traver
ARNOLD & ITKIN LLP
6009 Memorial Drive
Houston, Texas 77007

Christopher Hughes
Don Wheeler
WHEELER & HUGHES
101 Tenaha Street
P. O. Box 1687
Center, Texas 75935

ATTORNEY FOR PLAINTIFFS

/s/ Christopher S. Coleman