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Ferndale Café Operator Arrested for Putting Customers at Risk

A prolonged attempt to get a local café operator to comply with food safety regulations and water quality laws culminated in the arrest of Fernbridge Café operator Steve Sterbeck. Humboldt County District Attorney Investigators arrested Sterbeck on March 31, 2011.

“The impetus for the arrest was Sterbeck’s continued refusal to comply with the Health and Safety Code, which effectively put every one of his customers at risk for serious illness,” explained Humboldt County District Attorney Paul Gallegos. “It is unfortunate we had to resort to extreme measures, but Sterbeck gave us no other options.”

A series of attempts since 2009 by the County to assist Sterbeck in addressing water quality issues met with little success, and after a March 18, 2011 test confirmed high levels of coliform and E coli bacteria in the Café’s water, both of which can cause severe illness and death to humans, officials were forced to react.

On March 18, 2011, the Humboldt County Division of Environmental Health served a “Notice of Suspension of Food Facility Permit” on Sterbeck, and he was advised by county officials to immediately close the restaurant.

On March 31, 2011, the Café was still open and serving food to the public, in direct violation of the suspension notice and numerous health and safety statutes. Violating these statutes is considered a criminal act and violators face fines and/or imprisonment of up to six months in county jail.

“Sterbeck’s continued operation was exposing the public to grave and imminent danger and had to be addressed,” Gallegos added.

Sterbeck was booked into Humboldt County Correctional Facility, but was later released by the jail. No charges have been filed against Sterbeck, pending an ongoing investigation.

Deputy District Attorney Christa McKimmy specializes in environmental and consumer protection prosecution and is evaluating the case for further action.