

Reports of roaches, rodents close 2 restaurants

By Zack McDonald, March 1, 2017, USA

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PANAMA CITY — Two area restaurants were shut down last month because of evidence of roach and rodent activity and other possibly hazardous conditions, according to health inspection reports.

In February, the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulations (DBPR) issued emergency closures for one business in Panama City — Ramon Pizza at 4100 15th St. — and one in Port St. Joe — Smiley Fried Chicken at 405 Baltzell Ave. Sanitation and safety specialists reported finding conditions that could contribute directly to a food-borne illness or injury at the time of their respective inspections. Both corrected the health concerns before a follow-up inspection a day afterward and were allowed to reopen, state inspectors reported.

DBPR specifies the inspections are snapshots of a business at that time only. Both businesses currently have active state licenses and are open. The two recent closures add to the two similar incidents at other food vendors so far this year.

Most recently, inspectors arrived to Ramon Pizza on Feb. 20 about 5 p.m. to check for health violations. Officials reported discovering the dish machine was operating at below "proper minimum strength" sanitation levels and some refrigerated food items — such as mushrooms, tomatoes and taziki sauce — were being stored at 60 degrees, whereas regulators require the items to be kept below 41 degrees, DBPR reported.

As they further scanned the restaurant, inspectors also reported evidence of live rodent activity by finding more than 20 fresh rodent droppings under the front counter.

Clifton Cruz, manager of Ramon Pizza, disputed whether what inspectors claimed were rodent droppings were in fact that. He said a power surge, possibly from a storm around

that time, was responsible for an issue with the refrigerator, but it was fixed the next morning when inspectors returned.

"We could not get a technician there immediately, so we closed," Cruz said. "By the next morning, we were good to go."

Ramon Pizza was closed momentarily but corrected the issues and was allowed to reopen. However, it isn't the first time the restaurant has been closed over health concerns. In October of last year, inspectors reported seeing a live mouse stuck to a sheet of sticky paper near the rear exit door. An employee also was handling food on the cook line without first washing his hands, and inspectors found a "mold-like substance" in the interior of the ice machine, officials reported.

Some time-sensitive foods also were not properly date marked. Most of those violations were corrected on site and the business was allowed to reopen the same day, DBPR reported.

Earlier in the month, Smiley Fried Chicken at 405 Baltzell Ave. in Port St Joe also was closed shortly after a Feb. 1 inspection during which officials reported seeing evidence of live roaches and rodents on the premises.

An inspector reported seeing three live roaches on the floor and wall by a fryer near a service window, two live roaches under a triple sink, two live roaches under a hand sink counter and four live roaches under upright freezer. They then noticed what appeared to be rodent droppings under the counter of the triple sink.

Several dead roaches also were present at the time of the inspection, officials reported.

Tan Smiley, owner, said he was not far out of compliance from previous inspections, but the recent inspection seemed more intense than others.

"I don't have a problem with inspections or the rules — we need those around here," Smiley said. "But I truly feel like I was getting the white glove treatment."

Smiley said he works hard to fight the battle of insects trying to get indoors, which is nonstop. He added he is debating whether he should accept the findings or contest them and end up going out of business by hiring a lawyer.

According to DBPR reports, this is the first time Smiley Fried Chicken has been closed for violations. When health inspectors returned at 10 a.m. the following morning, all violations had been corrected, and Smiley Fried Chicken was allowed to reopen shortly after lunch.