

Thai fruit processor Natural Fruit Company Limited has sought THB300 million (US\$10.2 million) in libel damages from a British human rights lawyer for "broadcasting false statements to public media". 

Defendant Andy Hall was a co-author of a report published by human rights group Finnwatch in January this year, titled "Cheap has a high price: Responsibility problems relating to international private label products and food production in Thailand".

The report was based on testimonies given to Hall by company workers, alleging Natural Fruit employed underage labor, confiscated the passports of migrant workers from neighboring Burma, and paid below minimum wage.

Both criminal and libel charges have been brought against Hall under Thailand's Computer Crimes Act, website *Nationalmultimedia.com* reported. If found guilty on criminal charges, Hall could face up to two years in prison.

In a release, Finnwatch labeled the legal action an "attack on freedom of expression and human rights defenders". It said that during the study that ran from October to November last year, Natural Fruit Company had been contacted several times and did not want to comment on the observations or contribute to the report.

The plaintiff's lawyer Somsak Torugsa urged Hall, who was not present for the Southern Bangkok Criminal Court hearing on Monday, to show up and prove his innocence, the story reported.

"If you are really innocent, then face the judicial process and things will be over. If you want to negotiate, do contact us," he was quoted as saying.

The court agreed to Torugsa's request for a court order to obtain Hall's entry and departure records from the Immigration Bureau, the *Bangkok Post* reported.

Natural Fruit vice president Kachin Komneyawanich said Hall's reports and communication with the public had damaged his company and were without truth, the story reported.

The Natural Fruit Company produces canned pineapples, bananas, guavas, papayas, rambutans and mangoes.

www.freshfruitportal.com

