

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

The recent beef recall announced by USDA and Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company has resulted in a multitude of questions to our office. I have attempted to convince individuals that incidents such as this one do not represent the standard or our industry. Unfortunately, they do generate significant media attention. Regrettably, the meat sector of our agricultural industry is at least temporarily tainted with a negative image.

USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) works diligently to maintain and implement controls to sustain food safety and to prevent the inhumane handling of animals at harvesting facilities. Perhaps a few Questions & Answers from the USDA Press Office will be helpful to concerned readers.

Q. How does FSIS know that this is not happening at other establishments?

A. FSIS believes this to be an isolated incident of egregious violations to humane handling requirements and the prohibition of non-ambulatory disabled cattle from entering the food supply. FSIS inspection program personnel are trained to identify these behaviors and act immediately if they witness animals being handled in an inhumane manner and to prevent non-ambulatory disabled cattle being moved to slaughter.

Public Health Veterinarians or other inspectors visit the holding pens to conduct ante-mortem inspection on an entire lot. They also randomly return to the area to observe specific humane handling activities at other times throughout each production shift.

Plant employees are required to handle animals in a humane manner that minimizes excitement, discomfort and stress. Employees also are required to immediately notify FSIS inspection program personnel if an animal becomes non-ambulatory after passing ante-mortem inspection.

Q. Has USDA increased its inspection procedures at other facilities since these allegations?

A. No. FSIS believes this to be an isolated incident of egregious violations to humane handling requirements and the prohibition of non-ambulatory disabled cattle from entering the food supply.

There are 7,800 inspection personnel that provide inspection to more than 6,200 federally inspected establishments. USDA has continuous presence at all federally inspected slaughter facilities. USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service is responsible for assuring that the nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry and egg products is safe, wholesome, correctly labeled and packaged. FSIS is also responsible for ensuring that establishments follow all food safety and humane handling regulations.

In 2007, FSIS issued a total of 66 suspensions to federally inspected establishments, 18 percent (12 suspensions) of which were for egregious humane handling violations witnessed by inspection program personnel.

Of 6,200 federally inspected establishments, approximately 900 slaughter livestock and are therefore subject to the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. In 2007, FSIS conducted approximately 167,540 humane handling verification activities resulting in 691 noncompliance records (0.41 percent noncompliance rate) at these facilities. Noncompliance records for humane handling may be issued when the violation is less than egregious, such as not having water available in pens.

What is a non-ambulatory, "downer," animal?

A. Non-ambulatory disabled livestock are livestock that cannot rise from a recumbent position or that cannot walk, including, but not limited to, those with broken appendages, severed tendons or ligaments, nerve paralysis, fractured vertebral column, or metabolic conditions.

Once an animal that is ambulatory has passed ante-mortem inspection and then becomes non-ambulatory disabled, for example with evidence of an acute fracture, such an animal must be re-examined by the Public Health Veterinarian to determine whether the animal can proceed to slaughter.

Q. Are downer cattle allowed to enter the food supply?

A. On July 13, 2007 FSIS issued the final rule "Prohibition of the Use of Specified Risk Materials for Human Food and Requirements for the Disposition of Non-Ambulatory Disabled Cattle."

This rule requires that a case by case disposition must be made by an FSIS Public Health Veterinarian for every animal that becomes non-ambulatory disabled after passing ante-mortem inspection.

If the Public Health Veterinarian determined that the animals had sustained an acute injury, then it would have been passed and eligible for processing. If the disposition was found to be a chronic condition, then the animal would be condemned and therefore considered unfit for food. The prohibition of downer cattle from entering the food supply is only one measure in an interlocking system of controls the federal government has in place to protect the food supply. Other BSE measures include the feed ban that prohibits feeding ruminant protein to other ruminants, an ongoing BSE surveillance program and the required removal of specified risk materials.

FSIS requires the removal of specified risk materials (SRM) from entering the food supply.

According to scientific evidence, the tissues containing the infectious agent that causes bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) are the brain, spinal cord, and distal ileum (small intestine), which are removed from the rest of the carcass at slaughter. Therefore, the meat products are not be expected to be infected or have an adverse public health impact.

FSIS line inspectors are stationed at designated points along the production line where they are able to directly observe SRM removal activities.

Our agricultural industry will continue to work diligently, all the way from production to processing, to ensure the comfort of our animals and the safety of the nation's food supply. Please do not let an isolated incident destroy your confidence in a system that normally works extremely well.