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FSIS Docket Clerk  
Food Safety and Inspection Service  
United States Department of Agriculture  
Room 102 Cotton Annex, 300 12th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20250-3700

RE: FSIS Docket No. 97-068N "Beef Products Contaminated with Escherichia coli O157:H7"

Members of Nebraska Cattlemen appreciate the USDA for allowing comments of "Beef Products Contaminated with Escherichia coli O157:H7." As producers and consumers of beef we are committed to eliminating any health risks associated with E. coli O157:H7. However, this action is of great concern to us because we feel this would be a step in the wrong direction and do not support the policy as it is currently written. We are concerned with three main issues: 1. Increased testing is not scientifically based to eliminate the pathogen on non-intact beef products; 2. Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) and various technologies are designed to destroy pathogens and pathogen loads. So, the likelihood of finding a pathogen such as E. coli O157:H7 is minimal; and, 3. Increased testing is a step toward producer liability due to packer mishandling.

Until now, only raw ground beef products contaminated with E. coli O157:H7 were classified as adulterated under the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) unless the ground beef was further processed to destroy the pathogen. Beef producers are committed to doing what it takes to ensure the safety of the U.S. beef supply and will support meaningful rules and regulations by USDA. However, we are concerned that today's action could further limit the industry's ability to make further advances in prevention, as well as inhibit testing for E. coli O157:H7 by the industry.

1. The notice to change the agency's policy to treating non-intact products, that have been subject to various treatments such as mechanical tenderization, that test positive for E. coli O157:H7 as adulterated is not based on scientific evidence. Studies funded by beef producer checkoff dollars indicate that during the rare times the pathogen is found on the exterior of the product, the possibility of E. coli O157:H7 being transferred from the exterior of the intact cuts to the interior of the product after mechanical tenderization is negligible. Currently acceptable cooking recommendations for these products further reduce the risk of E. coli O157:H7. And, according to the Centers for Disease Control, no illnesses have been attributed to the consumption of mechanically tenderized meats. Further scientific research is needed on intact

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and non-intact muscle meats before USDA makes policy changes. Implementing policy that is not scientifically based may not only be ineffective, but in the meantime may waste both the producer's and consumer's tax dollars.

2. In 1996, USDA regulations moved the meat and poultry inspection system to a scientifically-based system of hazard prevention known as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems. This system has proven effective in greatly reducing bacterial loads on meat products. Also, over the past 10 years, the beef industry has aggressively developed and implemented various technological interventions specifically targeted to destroy pathogens. As a result, the likelihood of finding pathogens such as E. coli O157:H7 on raw beef products is minimal. Nebraska Cattlemen encourages USDA to verify that HACCP systems are working as intended rather than expand testing to raw intact and non-intact cuts of beef. We are confident that, through the proper implementation of HACCP systems and the incorporation of pathogen destroying technologies, the number of E. coli O157:H7 positive test results on carcasses will be minimal.

3. Increased testing is one step toward individual carcass testing. Individual carcass testing does nothing to ensure the safety of the carcass that tests positive. FSIS cannot allow the meat industry to move in this direction. It is a bad move for both producers and consumers and only benefits packers. Individual carcass testing would allow packers to be less careful processing beef and in turn discount producers if a carcass is positive for E. coli O157:H7. This would without a doubt negatively affect every sector of live cattle production. Additionally, this would only allow the ability to shift blame and not eliminate E. coli O157:H7, which is the ultimate goal. Expanding recall potential also will continue to consolidate the beef packing industry without having any positive impact on the safety of the product. We must ensure that we are taking every appropriate step to reduce the potential risk that this pathogen poses to our consumers without placing an undue burden on cattlemen.

We are also concerned that USDA is not addressing the most pressing issues regarding E. coli O157:H7 prevention. For instance, a coalition of beef producers, grocers, food service outlets, processors and scientists presented the Secretary last fall a comprehensive plan to prevent E. coli O157:H7 in beef that includes research and regulatory priorities. We urge the Secretary to act on appropriate components of the plan.

The Nebraska Cattlemen strongly oppose expanded testing for E. coli O157:H7. We are firm in the stance that any testing changes must be scientifically based, be beneficial to consumers and not detrimental to producers. Thank you for allowing producers the opportunity to make our views known to the USDA on this very important issue.



Homer Buell  
President-Nebraska Cattlemen