



## Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

2105 First Avenue South  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404

USA

[iatp.org](http://iatp.org)

[agobservatory.org](http://agobservatory.org)

*The Institute for Agriculture  
and Trade Policy promotes  
resilient family farms,  
rural communities and  
ecosystems around the world  
through research and education,  
science and technology,  
and advocacy.*

COMMENTARY Feb 21, 2008

# Cattle abuse, beef recall highlight systemic weaknesses

By Steve Suppan

On February 17, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recalled 143 million pounds of frozen beef from Hallmark/Westland Meat Co. in California — the largest beef recall in U.S. history. The recall comes three weeks after the Humane Society posted a graphic video of cattle abuse at the plant, a supplier to more than 100,000 school lunch and child care programs in 36 states, including 700 schools in Minnesota.



Steve Suppan

The abuse, including beating and shocking animals with electric prods, violated U.S. Department of Agriculture rules, and the agency initially informed state Departments of Education to put a “hold” on using Westland meat. Minnesota Education Commission Alice Seagren informed school districts where Westland ground beef had been shipped, “so that they can take appropriate action.”

Unfortunately, the recall affects beef products dating back to February 2006, and most have already been consumed. Thus far, there has been no official explanation for hundreds of anxious Minnesota parents who called to ask why eating such beef might make their children ill. The USDA is now investigating to determine whether Westland meat is contaminated by pathogens, including salmonella, E. coli 0157:H7 and BSE (mad cow), that occur more frequently in animals unable to walk.

According to the Washington Post’s Rick Weiss, the workers had been abusing animals to force them to stand for the brief time that USDA inspectors were in the plant to certify them as “healthy” for slaughter.

The Westland incident, unfortunately, is emblematic of a meat food safety system cracking at its foundation. In 2007, more than 30 million pounds of ground beef were pulled off the market in 20 recalls because of possible E. coli contamination. As the industry has consolidated, larger plants process more cows than ever before. In the case of ground beef, one sick cow can contaminate thousands of pounds of hamburger. Older dairy cattle, more prone to disease, are often used for ground beef. And as we’ve seen in the Westland case, a contamination in a single plant can affect consumers all over the country.

While contamination outbreaks have increased, our food safety inspection system has declined. The Humane Society’s six-week undercover investigation, not USDA inspectors, detected rule violations that would have prohibited the cattle’s slaughter for food consumption. Instead of thanking the Humane Society, brand-new USDA Secretary Ed Schafer scolded the group for not contacting the USDA as soon as the “alleged viola-

tions” were discovered, apparently unaware of the USDA’s history of disciplining government inspector whistleblowers and the lack of whistleblower protection for slaughterhouse employees.

Many animal-health and food-safety system weaknesses have been documented over the past decade. In a nutshell, the current system has not invested in an adequate number of inspectors and has not equipped those inspectors with state-of-the art technology. But perhaps most importantly, the USDA relies on the meat and poultry processors, instead of federal officials, to control the sampling of meat products to detect contamination.

To remedy these systemic vulnerabilities, the USDA wants to implement a “risk-based” system, where the agency sends inspectors to plants where management believes contamination is most likely to occur and reduces inspections elsewhere. But for this approach to have any chance of success, the USDA needs not only more inspectors and better technology, but more knowledge of possible risks only by reasserting federal control over the food safety system. In December 2007, the Office of the Inspector General reported that the USDA’s Food Safety Inspection Service had neither sufficient data nor enough food safety assessments of slaughterhouses and meat processors to implement a risk-based inspection program.

Weaknesses in the USDA food inspection system are not limited to the United States. President Bush’s Interagency Working Group “Action Plan for Import Safety” wants to apply the current system to foreign firms whose food products would be certified as safe for export to the U.S. According to the president’s July 18 mandate to the Working Group, U.S. oversight of foreign “risk-based” inspection must be done “within existing resources,” both human and monetary.

The Government Accountability Office, the OIG and nongovernmental organizations have documented how a food safety system hobbled by not enough inspectors, inadequate detection technology, ineffective enforcement, and de facto industry control over sampling of food products for contamination have dangerously weakened federal food safety oversight. The U.S. government and food industry should heed recommendations in these reports to redesign the system and enforce its rules. Minnesota parents shouldn’t have to worry about the meat their children are eating in school. The horrors revealed in the Humane Society video and the anxiety of the parents of Minnesota’s school children must not become widespread and recurrent features of our food supply system.

*Steve Suppan is a senior policy analyst at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy*

\*This commentary originally appeared in the February 19, 2008 issue of the St. Paul Pioneer Press