

SAFE FOOD COALITION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Consumer Groups Urge USDA to Immediately Approve Labeling of Mechanically Tenderized Meat Products

Members of the Safe Food Coalition wrote today to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack urging him to immediately approve a proposal to label mechanically tenderized beef products. The proposal must be approved by the Secretary before it is sent to the Office of Management and Budget for review. The letter is available [here](#).

Often used on less expensive cuts of meat to increase tenderness, mechanical tenderization is a process by which small needles or blades are repeatedly inserted into the product. These needles or blades pierce the surface of the product increasing the risk that any pathogens, such as *E. coli* or *Salmonella*, located on the surface of the product can be transferred to the interior. In order to kill pathogens which may be located on the interior of these products, consumers must cook these products differently than they would intact steaks and roasts. Without labeling to identify these products as mechanically tenderized and non-intact products, and information on how to properly cook these products, consumers may be unknowingly at risk for foodborne illness. Labeling of mechanically tenderized products would allow consumers to identify these products in the supermarket.

Based on estimates from the Food Safety and Inspection Service's 2007 Beef Checklist, approximately 18% of all beef steaks and roasts sold in the U.S. are mechanically tenderized. This means that approximately 50 tons of mechanically tenderized products are produced each month.

USDA has known about this potential threat for many years. As early as 1999, USDA/FSIS publicly stated that mechanically tenderized meat products were considered non-intact products because the product had been pierced and surface pathogens could have been translocated to the interior of the product. USDA/FSIS further stated, "As a result, customary cooking of these products may not be adequate to kill the pathogens." At that time, USDA/FSIS said that they would not require a label for these products but strongly encouraged industry to label all non-intact, mechanically tenderized meat products with safe food handling guidance. To date, industry labeling of these products is rare.

In June 2009, members of the Safe Food Coalition wrote to USDA urging the mandatory labeling of these products. Consumer groups raised the issue again in January 2010 following the December 24, 2009 recall of 248,000 pounds of mechanically tenderized steaks that sickened twenty-one people in 16 states. In June 2010, the Conference for Food Protection petitioned FSIS to put forward regulations that would require mechanically tenderized products to be labeled.

The groups – Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America, Consumers Union, Food & Water Watch, Government Accountability Project, National Consumers League, STOP Foodborne Illness, and US PIRG – are asking the Secretary of Vilsack to immediately approve the labeling of mechanically tenderized beef products and send the proposal to OMB for review. USDA should also develop and implement a sampling program for the detection of pathogens in non-intact beef products. And USDA should implement an educational outreach campaign to inform the public and food service meat purchasers about the proper cooking and handling procedures necessary to reduce the risk of foodborne illness from mechanically tenderized beef products.

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The Safe Food Coalition is made up of consumer groups, public health groups, groups representing victims of foodborne illness, and labor organizations dedicated to reducing the burden of foodborne illness in the United States by improving government food inspection programs.

The Safe Food Coalition letter to Secretary Vilsack is available here:

<http://www.consumerfed.org/pdfs/Comments.SFC.Vilsack.Mech.Tenderized.Meat8.23.12.pdf>