

SAFE FOOD COALITION

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August 24, 2012

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

The undersigned members of the Safe Food Coalition write to urge you to expedite and approve a proposal before your office to label mechanically tenderized beef products. Labeling of these products is an important first step so that consumers can make informed decisions about their food purchases and understand what steps are necessary when handling or preparing these higher-risk products. As you know, mechanically tenderized products (such as steaks and roasts) have been treated with a process that repeatedly inserts small needles or blades into the product. These needles or blades pierce the surface of the product increasing the risk that any pathogens located on the surface of the product can be transferred to the interior. Consumers need to be provided with labeling information so that they can make appropriate selections and take the necessary steps in handling and cooking these products.

Members of the Safe Food Coalition have been waiting for over three years for USDA to label mechanically tenderized meat products. On June 12, 2009, the Safe Food Coalition wrote you and asked USDA to address the important public health threat presented by these treated and non-intact products. The coalition also issued a press release in January 2010 urging the Department to act after the December 24, 2009 recall of 248,000 pounds of mechanically tenderized steaks that sickened twenty-one people in 16 states. Since then, the Safe Food Coalition has had multiple meetings with the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) about mechanically tenderized meat products and has routinely asked about the progress of the labeling proposal at the monthly Safe Food Coalition meetings with FSIS.

Other food safety stakeholders are also interested in this issue. In June 2010, the Conference for Food Protection petitioned FSIS to “promulgate regulations requiring that packers or processors of mechanically tenderized beef cuts label these products to identify that they have been pinned, bladed or otherwise mechanically manipulated in a way that tenderizes the meat by penetrating the intact muscle.”¹

USDA is well-aware of the potential threat that these products pose to consumers. As early as 1999, USDA publicly stated that mechanically tenderized meat products were not considered “intact products” and needed to have more specific cooking instruction included on their labels.² In USDA’s 2004 *Fulfilling the Vision*, FSIS once again clearly identified mechanically tenderized meat as a non-intact product that needed special attention.

¹ Conference for Food Protection Petition. USDA/FSIS Regulations & Policies. June 17, 2010.

http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Regulations_&_Policies/Petitions/index.asp

² U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service. Beef products contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7 (64 FR 2803) January 19, 1999. <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/oppde/rdad/FRPubs/99-060Npm.htm>

Further, since 2003, FSIS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have tracked multiple meat recalls and foodborne illness outbreaks associated with non-intact, mechanically tenderized products,^{3 4} and USDA's Agricultural Research Service has conducted multiple studies, showing that translocation of pathogenic material from the surface of an intact steak or roast to the interior can occur during blade and needle tenderization processes and recommends thorough cooking to offset this risk.^{5 6 7}

However, to date, all of this work has had little impact on reducing foodborne illness because the public has not been informed about the potential risk that these products pose. Without a label to identify mechanically treated meat products, along with information to help mitigate the risk, the unsuspecting purchasers of these products – whether they are restaurant cooks or consumers – will have no idea that the product that they have selected needs additional protective handling and preparation.

Given USDA's food safety goals and its acknowledgement of mechanically tenderized meat as a non-intact and higher risk product capable of causing illness – along with the research that documents translocation of all types of pathogens into the interior of these products – it is past time for USDA to require labeling of all mechanically tenderized products.

We urge you to immediately approve the proposal to label mechanically tenderized beef products. Further delays are unacceptable.

Sincerely,

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

US Public Interest Research Group

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service. 2007. Michigan firm recalls beef products due to possible *E. coli* O157:H7 contamination. Recall included boxes of mechanically tenderized steaks and ground beef of varying weights. Davis Creek Meats and Seafood, Kalamazoo, MI, May 11, 2007. http://www.fsis.usda.gov/fsis_recalls/Recall_Case_Archive_2007/index.asp

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2010. Two multistate outbreaks of Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* infections linked to beef from a single slaughter facility—United States, 2008. *Morb. Mortal. Wkly. Rep.* 59:557–560.

⁵ Luchansky, J., R. Phebus, H. Thippareddi, J. Call. Translocation of Surface-Inoculated *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 into Beef Subprimals following Blade Tenderization. 2008. *Journal of Food Protection*, Vol. 71, No. 11, pp. 2190–219.

⁶ Luchansky, J., A. Porto-Fett; B. Shoyer, R. Phebus, H. Thippareddi, J. Call. Thermal Inactivation of *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 in Blade-Tenderized Beef Steaks Cooked on a Commercial Open-Flame Gas Grill. 2009. *Journal of Food Protection*, Vol. 72, No. 7, pp. 1404–1411.

⁷ Luchansky, J., A. Porto-Fett, P. Shoyer, J. Call, W. Schlosser, W. Shaw, N. Bauer, H. Latimer. Fate of Shiga Toxin-Producing O157:H7 and Non-O157:H7 *Escherichia coli* Cells Within Blade-Tenderized Beef Steaks After Cooking on a Commercial Open-Flame Gas Grill. 2012. *Journal of Food Protection*, Vol. 75, No. 1, pp. 62–70.